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SO GREAT A MAN



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TORONTO

SO GREAT A MAN

BY

DAVID PILGRIM



How unfortunate that so great a man should have been
so badly brought up.

Talleyrand on Napoleon

On ne peut pas croire ce qui s'est passé du temps des
guerres de Napoléon.

*Corporal Dominique Fleuret of the
Fifty-fifth Regiment of the Line*

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TO
I. B.
IN GRATITUDE

PREFACE

THIS story will, it is hoped, be read as a tale, to stand or fall upon its merits as a tale. But for the reader who wishes to know to what extent an honest effort has been made to convey historic truth, a note will be found at the end of the book to be read or not, as he pleases, when the tale is done.

D. P.

CHAPTER I

§ I

THE lady, it seemed, was still in the same mood, refusing to be hurried, though in Paris the Emperor was waiting.

Felix Marbot, eighteen years of age and slim in his smart riding-coat, looked ahead between his horse's ears. The sun was dropping to the edge of the plain and shone on his thin dark face. Twilight would soon come and it was cheerless to be out on the roads during these evenings in early March.

A few paces in front of him, black against a yellow haze, the carriage moved steadily forward. The Emperor might call for an explanation—of the lady, Felix hoped, not of him. The Emperor was not one to be gentle with those who loitered.

Forward and down, into the eye of the sun, they rode towards Kehl and the stone bridge over the Rhine into Strasbourg. They should have reached the stage's end an hour ago. But the smith in his forest forge had been slow, though he had made up in good nature what he had lacked in skill. Felix had been all for pushing on and leaving the horse. But the lady had refused to hear of it. The four blacks were her own, a present from the Emperor; she would not have others to pull her coach. So, when Oriflamme had cast a shoe, they

had waited for him to be reshod.

The smith had blown his dying fire with great bellows, helped by his son: the two figures, man and boy, showing naked to the waist, their bodies brown and streaked with sweat.

For the first time since they had started—except, of course, each day at the journey's end—the lady had left her coach, attracted, perhaps, by the merry whistling of the smith and the thud of his blows as he shaped the shoe, or by the picture of man and boy together, beside the leaping flame, with the dark forest beyond and the wet road gleaming at the door.

She had seemed sorry when all was ready again and had apparently found pleasure in the scene. For she had given the smith a gold napoleon. He had looked at her with a kind of awe on his stupid face, and his boy had pulled a lock of hair on his forehead and ducked with an awkward gesture that had in it something of beauty. Thus might an imp of Vulcan have bobbed to Thetis when she came asking after the armour of Achilles.

They had lost forty minutes at the forge but still she refused to be hurried. Felix did not dare to urge her forward, leaving such persuasion as might be necessary to her companion, Marysia, who might be relied upon to urge the attractions of a full table and a warm fire.

Marysia was of a practical turn of mind. She liked her creature comforts and had a declared antipathy to being out after dark. She lived, moreover, in a voluble terror of assault and ravishment.

Felix smiled at a memory of old Major Dommartin whom they had met at Munich.

'And do you think, Major, that I may be assailed?' Marysia had asked him anxiously.

And the Major, looking hard, had said:

‘Not a hope, madam; not a hope.’

The smile faded as Felix spurred forward to overtake the carriage.

Drawing level with the window he looked down. The interior was upholstered in green corded silk and there were three small green leather boxes, with the monogram *W* in gold upon them, lying on the seat opposite the two women. One of the boxes was open, with lace at its edges.

Marysia, catching his eye, shook her head ever so slightly and Felix knew that once more he would have to disappoint Joachim. Joachim was continually grumbling. Such horses as these, from the imperial stables, chosen by the Count de Canisy himself, should not be treated like Dresden china. But the lady was firm. She would not allow them to be pressed.

Felix, receiving from Marysia that silent message, looked beyond her to where her mistress sat in her corner. His keen eyes took in every detail—the small head and, beneath the lace cap that she wore, yellow hair escaping in Titus curls, eyebrows strangely dark against a clear complexion and blue eyes.

She did not move, but sat as though her mind were elsewhere. She was certainly beautiful and they said she was clever. But the Emperor might have his pick of a thousand women, clever and beautiful as they were made, and Felix would have blushed to be about this business if he had thought that his passenger was no better than some consenting ladies he could name. He had known, however, from the first that this was not an ordinary mission. Otherwise the Emperor would not have instructed him personally in the details of his charge, as though they were as important as the plotting of a victory. And if he had not known it at first, he had

surely known it later at Walewice, when, rising from his presentation of the Emperor's letter, he had first looked into Marie Walewska's eyes. There was something between those two deeper than lust or purchase.

He had heard it said that she was only a political agent selling herself for her country, and a dreary country at that. Marcellin, his brother, had complained of it bitterly during the Eylau campaign—all mud in winter and all dust in summer. There were endless plains with scrubby trees and whitewashed houses. The peasants lived with the pigs and like the pigs, and there was no wine.

But Marie Walewska hoped that Poland would one day be restored, and the cynics maintained that this was a sufficient reason for her to be driving across Europe to meet the dispenser of kingdoms.

Walewska had something in her hand. He knew what it was without further looking, a miniature of the Emperor, set in diamonds and painted by Isabey. It lay always between her breasts and she would pull it out and let it lie in her hand during the long hours, her face taking on a devoted look. It was a poor thing to suggest that she had submitted to the Emperor for what she could get.

De Lespinasse had ventured to contradict him on that point in Munich. Felix felt his right arm in reminiscence. His first duel and on behalf of the Emperor's mistress. A foolish affair, for old Major Dommartin had come to hear of it and knocked up their sabres after the first exchange and told them with many oaths that, if they wanted to fight, they could fight the enemies of France, of whom there were sufficient and to spare. He had then given them each a kick up the backside and they had found themselves drinking wine in a pleasant Munich garden, till it had been time for

him to start off on his journey again with the cause of it all, who had fortunately heard nothing of the matter.

The carriage was winding down the hill to the plain. Through the pines Felix in the fading light caught glimpses of the Rhine. Once across the stone bridge, between Kehl and Strasbourg, he would be back in his own country and his mission on a fair way to success.

His mind went back to the day, almost a month ago now, February fifth in the year 1808 to be exact, when an imperial lackey, in blue and gold, had knocked on the door of his mother's house in the Faubourg Saint Honoré with a message for Marcellin. Marcellin was to come at once to the Tuileries to see Marshal Duroc. But a mistake had been made, for Marcellin had started for Spain only a week before. So Felix had gone back with the lackey to the Tuileries to explain matters.

Duroc had received him in an ante-room, standing on a carpet covered with golden bees, and there had been told of the mistake. He would give the clerks on the General Staff a wiggling. The Marshal had then looked him over and enquired his age, on which Felix, confessing to eighteen years, had wished himself elsewhere. For there had stood the Marshal, who had fought in twenty battles, in his splendid uniform with the gold leaves embroidered on it and his white silk stockings and thin sword, while Felix had been wearing only his second-best blue coat.

Then, as he had stood there awkwardly, with Duroc's eyes on him, the miracle had happened. For a voice had called 'Duroc!' and Felix had noticed for the first time that one of the doors of the ante-room was ajar.

'One moment,' Duroc had said, 'the Emperor.'

As though Felix had not recognised that voice!

Duroc had pushed open the door and Felix had caught the briefest glimpse of a room beyond, simply

furnished with a little table in the corner where a man sat writing—that must have been the tireless Méneval—and a great desk, with bronze griffins gripping its feet, set in the middle of it, and, beyond the desk, a rounded shadow.

Then the door had closed and Felix had remained alone, but only for a moment, for the door had opened again and the Emperor himself, in his green coat and white breeches, had come into the room.

He had beckoned to Felix with a plump finger and Felix had blundered forward, his tongue lying dry in his mouth. The Emperor had looked at him a moment, his head slightly on one side.

‘Can you ride?’ he had asked.

Then had come the inspiration.

‘Anywhere for you, sir,’ he had answered.

The olive face, scarcely on a level with his shoulder, had broken into a smile, but the eyes had looked him through and the fat hand had shot out and pulled him not too gently by the right ear.

‘You shall go, my friend, instead of that fire-eating brother of yours. Duroc shall see to it.’

Felix had managed to stand very stiff and upright, but there had been a mist in front of his eyes and he had not seen the Emperor very clearly.

Duroc’s instructions had been most explicit and the Emperor himself had added a word or two at parting. He was to go to Warsaw and escort to Paris no less a person than Countess Marie Walewska. He was to bring her to Paris not later than the twenty-fifth of March. She would travel in her own carriage and with her own horses. He was to make all arrangements for her safety. There must be no ostentation. She disliked ostentation and would travel under the name of Princess Jablonowska, who was in fact her sister-in-law.

Last of all, Duroc had given him an order on the Imperial purse for five thousand francs. An enormous sum it had seemed; but they were to travel in comfort, and it would be well, Duroc had said, if he looked first to his own clothes.

Here the Marshal had permitted himself the briefest glance at the second-best coat, and Felix had turned bright red, so that Duroc had smiled, put a hand on his shoulder and called him 'Little Tricolour', red face, blue coat and white breeches.

So Felix had gone round at once to Sandoz in the Rue de Seine, lodged a princely order and greatly astonished the old man by settling his account.

Felix looked down complacently at the riding-boots he was wearing. Sakoski had made them. He was not in uniform, but that would come. For, as soon as he got back to Paris, he would ask a favour. He must be allowed to enter the army. To be a civilian these days was impossible. It was no use his mother pretending that the family fortunes would not run to putting another son into the army, and it was no use her reminding him that Marcellin had already served ten years and did not yet command a squadron. There was only one career for a man who meant to rise in the world, for a man who at eighteen had been entrusted with a confidential mission and had his ear pulled by the Emperor.

Some of the richest men in the Empire had started in the ranks with only a halfpenny a day and that always in arrears.

Felix, riding into the sunset, thought of one Marshal that he knew—the Duke of Dantzic, who had married a washerwoman and now had the third largest house in Paris and almost as many lackeys as Murat, but found it difficult to persuade his Duchess, it was said, not

to launder her husband's shirts.

Felix smiled as his horse, on reaching the brow of the hill, broke into a light canter. They were descending steadily now. It would be dark in half an hour. The air was chilly after the rain and the going was bad. The road was rutted and the carriage swayed like a ship.

Felix was glad he was not inside it. He was nearly always sick travelling in coaches, as on that unhappy day with his father near Compiègne when they had taken on board cold chickens with eggs and ham and sausages, and he had found it impossible to eat anything at all.

A hand appeared at the window of the carriage. Felix knew what the signal meant. He touched his horse and drew level with Joachim.

'Too fast,' he said.

'We are going downhill, sir,' said Joachim in his clipped Polish accent. 'I cannot walk the horses downhill.'

'Then halt and put on the skidpans,' ordered Felix. Joachim shrugged his shoulders.

'It is late,' he complained.

'Do as I tell you,' said Felix shortly.

Joachim drew in his reins and brought the leaders to a halt. Vladislav, the footman, was already at their heads as Joachim dismounted, with much creaking of leather.

Felix approached the door of the carriage. The hand was beckoning again.

'Where are we?'

It was Walewska who spoke, and Felix looked down into her face.

'Not far now, madam,' he said. 'We are near Kehl and we shall be in Strasbourg in half an hour.'

'That is France, is it not?' she enquired.

Felix nodded.

'France, madam.'

'Do you hear that, Marysia?' said Walewska to her companion. 'In half an hour we shall be in France. I had not thought it would be so soon. You can go faster, Monsieur Felix, if you like. I do not mind the jolting.'

Felix bowed and turned his horse.

'Damn all women,' said Joachim crossly, who had just fixed the skidpans and now had to take them off again.

There was no trouble or delay at the frontier. The production of a paper with the Imperial seal was enough. Strasbourg lay before them, a tumble of dark roofs and gleaming windows. Felix drew his cloak about him as they clattered through the gate, the reservists on guard duty springing to attention as they drove past.

The Golden Pheasant at Strasbourg was an old-fashioned house, of great and justified repute, and Felix hoped that his exact instructions as to their reception, which he had given on the outward journey, would be carefully obeyed. A ragged boy, barefooted, was running in front of the carriage. Felix thought at first that he had been sent to show them the way through the twisting streets, but the boy had slipped like a minnow between the horses, carts and citizens obstructing the thoroughfare. He was their harbinger.

Strasbourg, being a garrison town, was never empty. Its streets at that hour teemed with the Emperor's men, and Felix rode at a walk beside his charges. They passed numerous groups of infantry of the line in blue cut-away coats and white breeches, with the number 117 on their shoulder-straps. A knot of cavalrymen was sprawling half across the road at the sign of the

Black Eagle, a hospitable inn, to judge by the number of its clients. One of them, a man with huge, grizzled moustaches, turned and cursed as the mud splashed his black dragoon breeches. The town was full of sound: the rumble and clack of wheels, the gritting of well-shod feet, the clatter of scabbards and, from somewhere far off, a cry of trumpets.

The boy was now out of sight, but Joachim did not falter and they soon passed the rose-red mass of the cathedral. Here the carriage turned sharp right and plunged into darkness, but not for long. Two men had appeared in leather aprons, each carrying a torch, and a smoky glare revealed the Heinrichgasse where lay the Golden Pheasant. The men with torches walked, one on each side of the narrow way, a little in advance of Felix, who was now riding side by side with Joachim. The torches showed a white stone arch and, beyond, the outline of a paved courtyard.

'Hold up, there,' shouted Joachim, as Oriflamme stumbled, momentarily striking a spark from the stony surface of the yard entrance.

The carriage swung creaking to the left into the yard and an ostler sprang to his horse's head as Felix jumped to the ground and turned sharply. The landlord, a red, substantial man in a snuff-coloured habit, was at his elbow.

'Everything is in order, sir,' said the landlord, bowing low. 'The ladies only have to step this way.'

Felix nodded and turned his head.

True enough the carriage had drawn up beside a doorway which gave directly on to the courtyard. A carpet had been spread on the steps leading to the door. He caught a glimpse of a polished wooden stair and two maids with white caps holding candles. One of them leaned forward. She had a round, attractive

face, glowing with health, and her yellow hair escaped from the edge of her cap.

Felix was standing at the door of the carriage as Vladislaw opened it and pulled down the folding steps. A hand was laid on his arm and Marie Walewska passed with a swish of silk. She blinked a little in the light of the candles and torches.

‘It has been a long day,’ she said, ‘but this is France; almost the end of our journey. Monsieur Felix, you will have supper with us tonight, of course.’

‘I shall be honoured, madam,’ answered Felix formally.

‘I’m as hungry as a hussar,’ said Walewska, still on his arm.

The rooms were exactly as he had chosen, a large bedroom with a four-poster, canopied bed for Walewska, a smaller bed in the corner for Marysia and, beyond that, a big parlour in which they would dine.

His own room was farther along the corridor at the head of the stairs.

He took the women into the parlour where a fire of beechwood leapt and crackled on the hearth. Walewska sighed and threw off her cape.

‘This will do very well,’ she said, with a smile at the bobbing hostess. ‘And supper, I hope, in twenty minutes,’ she added moving towards the fire and spreading out her hands.

Felix stood a moment at the door. Candles and firelight were reflected from copper pans, but the corners of the room were in shadow. Above the chimney-piece hung a print of the Emperor astride Marengo at Austerlitz, with General Rapp, wounded and bleeding, handing him the captured colours of the Russian Guard: a cheap reproduction of Gérard’s picture, of which there were thousands scattered throughout

France. Walewska was standing by the fire, her head thrown back, looking at it, and Felix saw a slight shudder pass through her slim body.

One of the maids pushed past him. It was the girl with the yellow hair, and she smiled as though her pushing had been not without intention.

Felix went down to see to the horses and found Joachim deep in altercation with the head ostler. For Joachim no stable was ever watertight or clean. After watching the horses for a while, Felix went back to his own room and put on his new blue coat, silk stockings and a pair of light shoes with silver buckles. His serious brown eyes stared back at him from the mirror and he was annoyed to find himself still looking so very young. The moustache was no more than a faint black cloud on his upper lip. As his mother used to say in moments of exasperation, it looked as though he had not wiped his mouth properly after drinking.

'If you were to join the ranks now,' he said, addressing his reflection, 'they would put wax moustaches on you.'

The candles were lit in the parlour and Vladislav had laid out the silver from the chest where it travelled in green velvet. Walewska was radiant and friendly as she had never been. She pledged him, as he sat down, in a glass of Riesling.

'This is France,' she said again, 'and soon it will be Paris.'

Marysia turned and looked sourly at her mistress.

'But you were not so very willing to start,' she said.

Felix glanced at her quickly. Marysia was going to be troublesome. He had learned to know the symptoms: pinched lips and a rabbit twitch of the nostrils. But it was a poor life playing wallflower to the Polish rose.

Walewska turned to her companion with a disarming smile.

‘Try some of this patty,’ she urged. ‘Strasbourg is famous for its patties.’

§ 2

Half an hour after dinner Felix was walking in the square under the cathedral. It was not yet time for bed, but what did the people of Strasbourg do with themselves during the evening? A little wind blew round the square, and above the unfinished tower of the cathedral hung a few spring stars. Felix turned into the first café he saw. He sat down and ordered a glass of wine. There were two men in black coats in the corner playing chess. A woman stood behind the bar.

It was all very dull, and Felix, falling from his sunset dreams of military fame, began more soberly to wonder what his present mission would bring. The Empire was for the moment at peace. They said that the peace was not likely to last, but that was military gossip. The people wanted peace, and there were some who maintained that the Emperor, having reached the summit of his power, would never be so foolish as to risk all that he had won. There was a French army in Spain, but it had gone as an army of liberators, friends of the Spaniards. Little enough was likely to come of that, and the mood of the French people was for ending the long feud with England.

But who could say what the Emperor would do, except that it would be something brilliant and unforeseen? He had behaved lately, it was said, as though he had come to a private understanding with Fortune and carried her wheel in his pocket. There were some who feared this strain in him.

Felix had got so far in his reflections when, as though to give them point and substance, three or four men in braided coats entered the café. He listened idly to their talk, which was entirely of trade and money. One of them, fat, with a deep jowl and a red face, was complaining bitterly.

'Paris,' he declared, 'is a spendthrift, but she will never buy like the English,' and proceeded to embroider the theme.

The Empress, at the late anniversary festival of the Empire, had worn a gown of Lyons velvet costing over a thousand francs a yard. But such extravagances were not a substitute for normal trade. Neither the Empress, nor a hundred like her, could replace the English dames who were now learning to do without French stuffs and ribbons.

Felix rose impatiently and, throwing a coin on the table, passed out into the street.

He strolled about and found himself presently in the Hohestrasse. His attention was attracted by a little man walking down the middle of the street and blowing on a horn. He wore a fantastic coat of many colours, topped by a huge hat with an enormous tricolour which was matched with a pair of red-and-blue striped stockings round his stumpy legs.

'Listen to me, good people,' he declaimed. 'General Jacquot will receive in ten minutes—at Monsieur Bonivant's café in the Turmgasse. Come and see His Excellency, General Jacquot. Come, soldiers, would you not like to salute your general? Come, ladies, would you not like to see the little general in his gilded coat?'

Felix shrugged his shoulders and passed on his way. General Jacquot was not amusing. He had seen that little monkey in the Turkish Garden two years ago in

Paris. He was said to be intelligent and could count up to ten, but he had seemed to be a very ordinary monkey and rather more afflicted with fleas than most of his kind.

‘Feeling lonely?’ said a voice in his ear.

A girl was beside him in a high-waisted silk frock. Her mouth was a red gash. She wore a ridiculous bonnet at the back of her head, which showed off her face, ringed with dark curls, and her painted lips smiled at him.

‘It is not very amusing here,’ said Felix, ‘and I am from Paris.’

‘From Paris?’

But at that moment a heavy body brushed against him and a thick voice rumbled in his ear.

‘So there you are, Celeste. Where have you been?’

The speaker thrust past Felix, pushing him off the narrow pavement into the gutter. He was a large hussar and his sabre clanked against the stones as he bent over the girl, one hand raised to a huge moustache in the military gesture. His broad back was turned on Felix, whom he completely ignored.

‘I am sorry,’ began Celeste, ‘but don’t you see I am busy?’

‘Busy?’

The big hussar swung round and looked Felix up and down for a moment. He had a red, stupid face with a scar across the forehead and he swayed a little in his high boots, for he was rather drunk. He shrugged his broad shoulders.

‘Not tonight, I think,’ he said, and thrust an arm about the girl, spreading a huge hand, on which the short black hairs curled, over one small breast.

‘Come,’ he said, and, looking once again at Felix

before he turned, made off down the street, hugging the girl fast.

Felix stood in the gutter, trembling with rage. He had more than a mind to follow the man and plant a kick on that broad bottom in the white breeches. But he mastered himself with an effort. It would ruin him to be mixed up in a brawl.

He swallowed his indignation and, disgusted with the streets, walked back to the inn.

Outside his room he met the little chambermaid with the yellow hair. Felix smiled at her. She had in her hand a warming-pan.

‘This is kind,’ said Felix.

She smiled back at him and Felix pushed open the door. A high bed stood in the corner of the room. He walked towards it and slipped a hand between the sheets.

‘They are warm, sir, and quite clean,’ said the chambermaid.

Felix turned. She was standing in the middle of the room and his pulses began to beat. He took a pace forward, putting his left arm around her shoulders and his right hand under her chin. Her breath smelled faintly of garlic but the lips were soft and warm.

Felix thrust his arm further around her. He, too, could take women like a hussar.

‘Be careful of the warming-pan,’ she said. ‘It’s hot, sir.’

§ 3

Soon after eight o’clock on the following morning they were on the road again. Marie Walewska was used to travelling now. The carriage with its green cushions and Marysia, her head muffled in a shawl, so that only her bright almond eyes were visible, were real

enough, but the whole journey still seemed fantastic. Day after day they had driven across Europe in the bitter spring weather through mud and over rutted roads, sleeping at inns which varied but were yet always the same. There had come to be a reassuring monotony in the bare trees, the steady clop-clop of the horses, the fresh face of Monsieur Felix bending ever and again to the carriage window or giving his hand to help her down the steps at noon and evening, but the strangeness of her adventure remained.

She looked through the open window, Marysia sniffing at her side, but not daring to suggest it should be closed. It had rained through the night, but now the sky was bright and the puddles on the road gleamed in the sun. Monsieur Felix, riding a little ahead on the left-hand side of the carriage, was gentling his mare, which seemed in high spirits that morning. Something of the spring was in her blood. There was a tang in the busy air as the carriage quitted Strasbourg by the Paris gate, and the newly planted poplars by the roadside trembled like reflections of themselves in troubled water. Tonight they would sleep at Metz and tomorrow at Nancy. Walewska sat back in her corner. Paris was very near.

Had she done right to come? She doubted it but had yielded, as she would always yield, to Napoleon. The wet road, still shining from the rain, recalled their first meeting. Was it only just over a year ago that she had waited in the crowd with Elzbieta to welcome the man who had come to deliver her country? The Emperor had stopped a moment in the little town of Bronie to change horses and she had marvelled to see how small he was, sitting back in his carriage and wearing an old grey overcoat. Every detail came back clearer now than at the time, for she had been too

moved to see consciously the picture that was yet somehow recorded in her memory: the wet road, clouds overhead spitting rain, the cheering crowd of workmen, potmen and small shopkeepers who had surrounded them. For a moment it had seemed that she would not be able to get near enough to deliver her message. Nor would she ever have reached him if Duroc had not caught sight of her, wedged in the press, and had not come to her help. Striding towards her in his riding boots, his blue coat splashed with mud, he had taken her by the hand and made a passage for her, so that at last she had come face to face with Napoleon, had stammered her few words and offered him flowers.

The note of a horn and a flurry of hooves upon the road called her back and she looked out of the carriage window. They were climbing now over the Vosges. The road was bordered first by chestnuts, with buds like sharp-pointed hearts on bare branches, but soon by beech trees, varied with pines. The carriage swung abruptly to one side as Joachim pulled over the horses and, a moment later, there passed at full gallop a light post-chaise with the Imperial monogram on the door. The guard was clinging to the box and winding his horn and the postilion was crouching low on the near-leader's back.

'The Imperial mails, madam,' said Monsieur Felix.

She nodded and smiled, but did not speak, and without a word he drew slightly ahead, leaving her again to her thoughts—a drift of faces, scenes and phrases. Prince Poniatowski, lean and black, stormed and battered upon her bedroom door at Warsaw. She must go to the Emperor and win him to their cause. Had she not said she was ready to do anything for Poland? Madame de Vauban whispered in her ear, demanding with an odd relish, whether the sacrifice

was after all so terrible. They had stood around her for hours, pleading with solemn faces, till at last she had been beaten down.

Do what you please with me. Her lips moved to the remembered words.

How she had hated Napoleon when first she had known what she must do, and even more bitterly the men who served his pleasure. Strange how all her values had changed, for now she esteemed Duroc as a faithful friend of the Emperor and would be glad to see him once again. But that night she had scarcely been able to bear his hand upon her arm when at last he had come for her, helped her into the carriage and jumped in beside her without a word. The carriage had stopped almost at once and they had passed together through a small door, up some stairs and along an empty corridor. Another door had opened. Duroc had pushed her gently forward and she had seen the Emperor standing before a fire in a blue and white coat and a cross upon his breast.

Then her memory failed, or rather she refused to allow it to perform its office. For the next scene was best forgotten, though, stare as she might out of the carriage window, over the wooded hillside, she could not quite shut from her mind a picture of herself clinging to the door in a panic beyond control. Yet, after all, nothing had happened and she could smile now upon the recollection of what followed. For, after that first sharp rebellion against his impetuous advance, he had changed, and they had talked far into the night—of her childhood, the old man she had married and the son she had borne, of the wasting of her youth, of his own need for affection and release.

Finally he had begun to talk to her in that strange exalted way of his, which more often amused or

chilled her than moved her the way he intended, so unreal it made him, as though he saw himself as a hero in some romantic tale of his native Corsica.

'Do not fear the eagle. You must try to love him, for he will be everything to you. Everything. Do you understand?'

After that he had put her cloak about her, but had refused to open the door till she had promised to come back next day.

She had not tried to love Napoleon. That had come of itself. Yet he had taken her, on that second night, by violence, dashing his watch to fragments on the ground and swearing that he would destroy her hopes if she did not yield: a pitiful, foolish scene, which had ended in her waking to life alone on the couch where Duroc had found her.

That was how Napoleon had taken her. And how could she honestly say that she would have had it happen otherwise?

To set on fire the heart of a man, Elzbieta had declared, was a woman's real desire. Why not admit it? Why not confess that her own most secret wish had been fulfilled?

The road dipped sharply, winding downhill between the beech trees. Monsieur Felix was riding again alongside and, at the movement she made, leaning a little from the window to catch the sweetness of the morning, he bent from his saddle. He made a fine figure with his dark hair and bright eyes.

'Happy, Monsieur Felix?' she said suddenly, and saw the quick blood rise in his cheeks.

'I could wish the journey were not to end so soon, madam. I could ride like this for ever.'

§ 4

Marysia complained of fatigue when they came to eat at the inn and Felix, at the suggestion of her mistress, told Joachim that they would rest an hour or more.

After lunch, when Marysia was lying down, well covered against the possibility of bed bugs, Walewska took his arm and they walked beside a small stream. She asked about his home and his parents ; questions that she had asked before. But she did not seem to tire of his answers, and he wondered why the tale of his father's death in the horrors of the siege of Genoa should move her so. The high-pitched roof of the inn was behind and the blue swifts darted and wheeled before them, a foot or so from the ground.

She never spoke of Napoleon. Why was that?

They started late and, in the afternoon, passed a column of infantry, breasting a slope, with drums and bugles. The men were spattered with mud, their faces grey and expressionless. They were very young, but marched stoutly to the music, looking curiously at the carriage as it drew to the side of the road to let them pass. They must be conscripts on the way to garrison duty in Germany. Felix hoped that he would never be one of them. He must somehow contrive to join the army in Spain, among the veterans of Jena, Eylau and Friedland.

They were late that night into Metz.

After Metz they slept at Nancy and, on the day following, the rain came down and progress was slow till they reached Châlons-sur-Marne. Here there was more trouble with Marysia. She complained bitterly of a cold and Walewska grew impatient, sending for Felix to come to the sitting-room, a large apartment with a ridiculous frieze of trailing garlands from which

the bright colours had long since faded.

‘It is this awful weather,’ complained Marysia.

‘What does one do for a cold, Monsieur Felix?’

Walewska was looking at him and there was more than a shadow of a smile in her blue eyes.

‘A cold, madam,’ said Felix gravely, inspecting the sufferer, who sat holding an inadequate handkerchief to her nose. ‘I will ask the landlord.’

The landlord loved a patient and was helpful.

‘Gin and rhubarb,’ he said. ‘Sovereign but powerful. The lady should drink it before going to bed or, better still, between the blankets. It will bring out a pleasant sweat and tomorrow she will be well again.’

Felix climbed the stairs to find Marysia dissolving in sobs and sneezes, with Walewska standing indifferently by the window watching the slanting rain.

‘Go to bed, Marysia,’ she said firmly, when Felix had announced the prescription. ‘I will bring you the drink myself. Or would you prefer Monsieur Felix?’

‘God forbid,’ said Marysia and fled from the room.

Ten minutes later the drink appeared, steaming in the landlord’s only silver tankard, a fine piece emblazoned with a coat of arms.

‘You got that from the local château in ’89, my friend,’ thought Felix, as he handed the tankard to Walewska. She wrinkled her nose and sniffed the brew.

‘Marysia will be as drunk as a lancer after this,’ she said, ‘but perhaps it will be better so.’

She passed into the bedroom. After a moment or two there came a spluttering and a few sharp sentences in Polish.

Walewska returned, smiling. The tankard was empty.

They dined alone together, with six candles on the polished boards of the table. Walewska was gay and made Felix talk to her of Paris.

‘Tell me about everything,’ she said.

But Felix could not tell her very much. His thoughts, as she smiled at him between the candles, whirled like the new-fashioned kaleidoscope at the Bal Tarare: red, blue, green, orange and all bright colours.

Early next morning Felix awoke to hear a great wind driving away the rain. The sun looked at them uncertainly all that day between clouds which scudded towards the country of Champagne. Marysia, only troubled now with a headache, soothed it in her corner. But Walewska was merry and voluble, leaning often from the window of the carriage and calling to Felix, who rode half that day bent from the saddle to catch her words.

With the sunset for a torch they drove into Château Thierry.

§ 5

Walewska, looking from her carriage at high noon, was glad that she had not yielded to the persuasions of Monsieur Felix. He had urged that, travelling incognito, she should enter the city at dusk. But she had no intention of stealing into Paris like a thief and Marysia was equally definite.

‘Madam,’ she had said that morning at breakfast, ‘we have come half across Europe to see Paris. Let us see it plain.’

Walewska stared about her. There was a bustle at the Porte Saint Antoine such as she had never thought was possible. The men on duty, except for a sentry leaning on his musket, were lounging on a bench in

the spring sunshine. A great cart, with a slovenly tarpaulin spread over it, rumbled past, the noise it made drowning the rumour of the city just beyond.

Monsieur Felix had dismounted and was spreading their passports before the Sergeant of the Guard. The man had a hard, overbearing look, but saluted civilly enough on finding the name of the Duke of Friuli upon the papers, simultaneously lifting an inquisitive urchin—who whined for pennies by the side of Monsieur Felix's horse—half across the road with a well-placed kick. Walewska drew in her breath sharply and, reaching for her purse, called to the child, who checked his tears and came to her.

Monsieur Felix, she saw, was talking to a wizened-faced man wearing a huge overcoat which blossomed abruptly into a number of dirty lapels.

'That will be our driver,' said Joachim, bending from the box. 'I could never manage these streets of Paris by myself.'

The man with the coat climbed to the seat beside Joachim and the carriage started forward so rapidly that Marie was jerked violently backwards against the cushions.

'Monsieur Felix,' she said sharply from the open window, 'tell him to go gently.'

The carriage slowed down.

'What street is this?' she asked.

'This, madam, is the Faubourg du Temple.'

The street was full of cries, light and movement and it seemed to her that heaven itself was astir, for, above the pointed roofs crowning the top storeys of the houses, which leaned back with an air of stilted surprise, streamed a flurry of spring clouds. Cabriolets, demi-fortunes and wiskis clattered along at a trot or sometimes at a canter. There was a constant creaking of leather

and snapping of whips. She exclaimed at the signs that swung from the shops. Most of them were old and faded, for there was a new mode of numbering the houses of the streets and signs were falling out of fashion. But some were bright and all were amusing, especially that sign on the right of a tailor who made uniforms for hussars of the guard and whose device was Three Maids in a Basket. On the walls of the houses and on shutters, anywhere that offered space enough, hung strips of paper of all shapes, colours and sizes, but especially at the corners of the streets or where alleys entered the faubourg. They offered in profusion the amenities of Paris: two excellent dinners for twenty sous, a complete suit of clothes made in three hours, free hats, seamless boots, waterproof shoes, the café Moka of the druggist Lamègre and the remarkable cures of Monsieur Lafitte, who, as she blushed to read, repaired rapidly the results of too ardent a worship of Venus. The faubourg was full of people, who all seemed to be in a hurry, pressing into the restaurants and cafés, silent with purpose or crying aloud to each other in the clipped Parisian accent. A man, wearing a wide blue coat and an extravagant hat, passed along with two girls, the belts about their light muslin frocks so high that they lifted the breasts to an unnatural angle. The man stared boldly into the carriage.

‘An actor,’ said Monsieur Felix in her ear, as he checked his horse to let them pass.

Every few yards was a group of persons collected under the windows of some shop. The print sellers, she noted, seemed in special favour, from whose stalls reproductions of Fanchon la Vielleuse, the famous drum-major of the Consulate, in his gold-and-blue braided uniform, or of Roustan, the mameluke of the Emperor, fixed their admirers with an empty stare.

There were times when the carriage could scarcely force a passage. An urchin ran beside the window imploring her to buy a set of rules of the game of piquet or fifty-two toothpicks for two sous. Next came a hawker offering eau-de-Cologne at ten sous a flagon, while, on the further side of the street, an old woman tendered shakily a caricature of the portly Prince Regent of England. Acutely above all other notes rose the cries of the street sellers: 'La v'là, mes enfants, la marchande d'amadou!' or, a little further on, the oyster woman: 'A la barq, à la barq, à la barq!'

A man thrust himself against the door of the carriage, an old man with a dirty beard and a brown coat, who had a number of small volumes upon a tray about his waist. The print was rough and the pictures gaudy.

'The compendium of dreams,' he chanted. 'The Ladies' Oracle. Do you dream of cats? Or of dogs? Have you seen moving water? Here is an explanation of all your dreams. A thousand thanks, gracious Duchess.'

Marie Waleska found that she had bought a book for a small coin, but sank back startled, as a wail, more piercing than all the rest, fell upon her ears. It was the ink seller, crying his old tune:

'On n'en a jamais vu comme ça, mia, mia mia, mia, mia, mia, jamais, jamais, de pareil à ça.'

At the corner of the Rue des Petites Écuries and the Faubourg Saint Denis the carriage was blocked for some time by two large waggons which, with wheels interlocked, filled the entire space of the roadway. At the side of the street a blind lottery seller had set his table.

'Fortune is blind,' he sang. 'Come to me. I, too, am blind.'

Beside him was the pitch of another charlatan, in

front of whom was a table of marionettes. Over it revolved a zodiac, turning upon a central column rising from the table.

‘Choose the character best suited to you,’ he urged. ‘Choose and may fortune favour the fair.’

‘Walewska leaned from the carriage. A stout citizen, with a stouter wife on his arm, was gazing at the board.

‘Roland, perhaps, for a stalwart man. Or Charlemagne? Or the Maid of Orleans? Or perhaps a Turkish emperor?’

The stout man nodded and threw a coin, whereupon the prophet touched a lever underneath the table and, in a moment, all the marionettes began to move and jerk, while the zodiac turned slowly above them. Faster they went, odd little figures, with hands that brandished swords, sceptres or bunches of flowers. Then with a click the mechanism stopped and all the marionettes lay flat except the Turkish emperor who pointed with his sceptre to the month of August and the figures 78 upon the zodiac above.

At that moment, however, with a jerk, the carriage started forward again. Presently it entered the Rue de la Victoire. Soon they were abreast of the Hôtel de Thelusson and, turning left, halted before iron gates. The gates were pushed back by two footmen in grey liveries and the carriage entered.

This was the journey’s end.

§ 6

At eleven o’clock that night Felix waited alone beside a plain sedan-chair from which a cloaked and silent figure descended and moved towards a house in the Rue d’Houssaye.

CHAPTER II

§ I

JOSEPH FOUCHÉ, Minister of Police, entered the hall of the Hôtel de Juigné, next door to his official residence on the Quai Voltaire, and began slowly to climb the stairs to the wide room on the first floor where he spent so much of his private time. It was near midnight and the party from which he had come had been tedious.

Caroline Murat, sister to Napoleon, and, some said, the real man of the family, was too thorough as a hostess to be really popular. She put on airs so nicely calculated that they defeated her purpose, which was to make men forget that she was proud, bitter, dangerous and unsatisfied. For, however magnificently she might queen it, she was only a grand duchess, and that, in her opinion, was one of the major scandals of the Empire.

Fouché walked up the broad marble staircase. Three of his lackeys, who stiffened as they heard his footsteps cross the hall, covertly watched him as he passed. A collar, heavy with gold, rasped his chin and the padded blue velvet coat—for he was in official dress—hung from his thin shoulders in leaden folds.

He climbed the stairs more slowly than usual and pushed open a wide door with a touch of absence in his manner.

From habit he looked about him for assurance.

Here were the tokens of his security, a defence against hazards successfully met or waiting to be overcome. A mind, tight and wary, might here relax and dwell upon achievement. Out of the nettle, danger, he had plucked this flower, safety, and, as though to give point to the image, a thicket of roses stood in a bowl upon a table near his desk.

Breathing more easily he looked from the roses to the green candelabra of blown Venetian glass, the Aubusson carpet beneath his feet with the gold and brown eagle bearing Ganymede in its talons, the couch of rosewood and walnut, the shelves lined with books and the mahogany desk. Beyond it a steady fire burned upon the marble hearth.

But he had only to shut his eyes and he would find himself back in the greasy black cassock of his seminary days, with the hard, sour smell of the well-scrubbed refectory table in his nostrils and Father Calvet droning from the reader's chair.

He would see himself slipping rebuked from the presence of Robespierre, afraid to sleep at home till he had secretly prepared for that prim, inexorable figure the doom which would otherwise overtake himself. Or he would be climbing the stairs to a squalid attic under the eaves, shunned and penniless, during the short period after the Terror when it was thought that revolution was finished, that reaction must triumph and that there could never again be a place in the world for a man who had voted the King's death and executed bloody vengeance on the city of Lyons. There were many such memories for a man who had lived all his life on the edge of things; who had risen, fallen and risen again; for whom life was a continuous weighing of chances.

He walked slowly across the room and went through

a bronze and olive-wood door to the library. He stood a moment fingering the curtains of stamped Venetian velvet that concealed the window. On the wall beside him hung a carved and gilded mirror and, obeying an impulse he could seldom resist, he gazed resentfully into it. He had a great dislike, almost a horror, of his own appearance. Where was the sign and seal of power? Often when at work, his mind alive with schemes, his eye would fall suddenly upon this image in the glass and he would stare at it, chilled and arrested. The blotched face, in its frame of slowly greying hair, had no life or meaning. The heavy-lidded eyes were not even mysterious, but merely gave him a sleepy, secluded look; and, when he surprised himself thinking a matter out, they were neither wary nor profound. At most they might be shifty, inquisitive or expressionless, as his mood or policy might require. They were set too close together beside a long, but not a drooping, nose. His mouth was thin and straight above the white stock about his throat; an inconclusive mouth. It was firm, but too small to show decision.

He smiled and the thin lips in the mirror smiled back at him; a pinched, ironic smile that came as near expressing him as anything ever would.

'At least we give nothing away,' was all they said.

The smile shifted to a light frown. But the frown conveyed no suggestion of authority or meditation or anger. It might mean life or death for those who served or thwarted his purposes, but it was never more than a peevish thing. The chin was broader than it seemed, but the concentric lines that ran down to it from the cheekbones brought it to a point and, when he set his jaws firmly together, they gave to his face an oddly unimpressive, smirking look.

To others he used to make fun of his ugliness and even try to exaggerate its effect, using it to disconcert or terrify his enemies or to impress those whom he wanted to conciliate or retain. But there were times when he could have smashed the mirror.

He moved away from it towards his desk and unhooked the stiff collar of his coat. It was not yet midnight, and dawn would find him still at work. He had lately spent too much of his time on the routine business of his department. But it had not been wasted. At any moment now he would be ready to uncover more than one promising conspiracy in a way that would put him in high credit with the Emperor. Prégent, with his agents in Brittany, was in constant communication with the royalists in London, and there was talk of an English descent upon the coast in support of the Bourbon princes. The police would act in good time and the affair was fortunate. The Emperor was growing dangerously tolerant towards the forces of reaction, and for the last three years his Minister of Police had been continually forced to bend his mind to a double task: to keep the Emperor true to the revolution and safe upon his throne.

The time had come to measure the results, to consider whether, perhaps, a change of policy might not be necessary.

The Emperor, if he would only be ruled for his own good, might be unassailable. But the Emperor would not be ruled. He was beginning to act like a man possessed. He needed peace with England, but was committing himself to further adventures in Spain. He would have to cease this perpetual tempting of fortune. He could not rely for ever upon yet another victory to extricate himself from difficulties wilfully provoked.

Fouché, sitting at his desk, his heavy-lidded eyes half-closed, allowed his thin lips to smile. According to his Imperial master common men were ruled by vanity. But was Napoleon himself exempt? This man had imposed himself on the imagination of his time. Was he beginning at last to impose upon himself?

Fouché, pinching his lips, unlocked his desk and took out a file of papers.

The Emperor was going to Bayonne. There he would be watching the situation in Spain, a nation in rebellion against a royal house degenerate and divided. Murat, active in Madrid, saw himself a king already in the sight of heaven and of his wife.

This Spanish business would be a test of the Emperor's sanity. The whole country was crying out for peace and Napoleon still had to found a dynasty of his own. Further entanglements were, on principle, to be avoided, and this one would be hazardous. What was likely to happen if the Emperor should ever become deeply involved in the affairs of Spain?

Fouché sat back in his chair. For the moment he did not follow that train of thought. But one thing was very clear. If the Emperor were bent on destroying himself, his Minister of Police, who would not follow him so far, must strengthen his footing elsewhere.

Napoleon, moreover, was not immortal and he still hesitated to provide himself with an heir. If he continued to evade his responsibilities in that matter, it would become necessary for those who were following his fortunes to find one for themselves. Napoleon had a weakness for his wayward, Imperial brother by the Grace of God, the Czar Alexander of Russia, and the Czar Alexander had a sister Catherine whom he dearly loved. Let her but love Napoleon and it was a marriage made in heaven.

But now had come a devastating complication. The Emperor, without a word to his Minister of Police, had sent to Warsaw for Marie Walewska. Fouché had not been supposed to know of it, but his agents had tracked young Marbot to the frontiers of France and had waited for him to return. The last report had come in that very day. The Walewska was in Paris and the Emperor had descended at her door only an hour ago.

How would she receive him? What did she expect from this encounter? Was she playing perhaps for a Polish kingdom? Her mere presence in Paris, pleading for her country, threatened the understanding with Russia. Metternich would shortly hear of it. That would mean an exchange of views between Petersburg and Vienna, and no good would come of it for France.

It was said that Napoleon loved the Walewska. More significantly it was said that for the first time Napoleon himself was loved. But the Emperor had so far never allowed any woman to influence his judgment. Would he risk a breach with Alexander to satisfy a private passion? The whole affair was dangerous, unprecedented, unaccountable.

Fouché leaned back in his chair. He was now sitting stone-still. Motionless himself, his thoughts were more free to move.

Walewska reigning as the Empress Marie in place of Josephine—was this not, perhaps, a possible solution? Napoleon, child of the Revolution, would be turning his back on the dynasties, barring the way to reaction. Here was a possibility which had as yet occurred to no one; not even, perhaps, to the Emperor himself.

Fouché stirred again and bent over the papers on his desk. These matters must wait. He would get

into touch with the Walewska. He had read and heard much concerning her, but had never met her and he trusted no judgment of man or woman but his own.

Meanwhile the Emperor had called for reports on the state of opinion in Bayonne, on the notabilities of the town, on the arrangements to be made for his personal security, on the agents who would be responsible for measures of discipline and police. These were matters of routine, but the Emperor had thought it necessary to call attention to them and to suggest that, for other and higher tasks—though his Minister of Police seemed often to forget it—he also had a Minister of the Interior and a Minister of External Relations.

Fouché began rapidly to look through a report lying on the table in front of him. He had no commissioner-general in Bayonne. That was a mistake to be remedied. These seaport towns needed constant attention. A mixed population, with many Spaniards—so ran the report. Of course there were many Spaniards; the town was near the Spanish frontier. What fool wasted his time writing such unnecessary stuff? He flicked over the pages, looking for the signature. Jacques d'Urberville. He made a note of the name. The man was not earning his pay.

Fouché took up his pen and scribbled a comment in the margin of the report.

What of the municipal councillors? Nonentities. Rich merchants all of them except for one, Menthon, known for his Jacobin opinions. The general feeling of the town was not very satisfactory. The English blockade had hit it badly and there was a strong party in favour of a lasting peace with England. Of course it was the same with all these coast towns. Local taxation was heavy and high profits were being made by smugglers.

The mayor, for all his loyalty, was suspected of trafficking in import licences. Fouché stroked his lips. This was serious. How did a provincial mayor get hold of import licences? It was a gross interference with the perquisites of the great.

He made another note in the margin. He would communicate with his own private agent in Bayonne. Gaston Barat, landlord of the Flowered Basket.

There came a knock at the door.

'Come in,' said Fouché, looking up irritably.

A footman entered, bearing a folded and sealed paper on a silver platter. Fouché picked it up and broke the seal.

'I must see you at once,' he read. 'I shall expect you not later than midnight. J.'

He glanced from the unread papers on his desk to the Buhl clock ticking quietly in front of him and hesitated a moment. Which was the more important, the work he had meant to do or this unexpected summons? The Emperor had requested him to give his personal attention to the reports from Bayonne.

Fouché jerked his shoulders imperceptibly as he rose and held the paper to the steady flame of the candle. He would disobey the Emperor, not for the first and probably not for the last time.

'My cloak and the plain chair at once,' he said.

The footman left the room. Fouché rang a bell on his desk and, from a door behind him, a man appeared in a snuff-coloured coat. He brought with him the smell of old books and something of the faded peace of those who handle them. But his hand on the door was indelicate and he had the neck and face of a gladiator.

Fouché pointed to the papers on his table.

'Work for you, Tisset,' he said. 'Make a digest

of these reports and tell Desmarest I shall expect to see him here at daybreak.'

'Daybreak, your Excellency?'

'Six o'clock. Tell him to bring the secret files, series B, relating to Bayonne and district and to prepare a letter for Commissioner Pierre at Bordeaux. The Commissioner is to go at once to Bayonne and wait for further instructions from me.'

§ 2

Three minutes later, covered by a long black cloak which hid the magnificence of his dress, leaning well back on the leather cushions of a grey-painted sedan-chair, without insignia or ornament of any kind, Fouché was borne through the streets of Paris towards the Tuileries.

The chair swayed as the men moved over the uneven cobbles of the Pont Carrousel. A cold wind, with more than a hint of rain, was blowing up the river. He leaned forward and drew the leather curtain in front of the window.

Josephine was clever as she was heartless, a dangerous woman. He had valued her as a friend. He must not undervalue her as an enemy. He thought of that summer day last year at Fontainebleau when, to her fury and consternation, he had begged her very solemnly, for the sake of the Emperor and his dynasty, and of the public good, to join the Senate in asking him to take another wife. There could be no peace between them after that.

But she had sent for him and must see him at once. To upbraid him? That was hardly an urgent matter. To appeal to him for counsel and support? That was not impossible. Old habits are not easily broken.

He had been her enemy for less than nine months; he had been her friend for many years. Perhaps she would plead with him. Almost certainly she would be hysterical and overwrought. He would have to wait and listen, wasting his valuable time.

The swaying chair halted and he dismounted at a little gate set in the iron railings surrounding the garden of the palace. A gust of wind, bearing rain so thin as to be almost mist, broke upon his face as he clambered from the chair.

He knocked on the gate, which was presently opened by one of the Empress's women wearing a grey cloak. A sanded alley between hedges stretched before him and to his right he heard the footfalls of the departing sentry.

He followed his guide up the alley. A door opened noiselessly. There was a flutter of vanishing skirts as he climbed a little stair. A light shone out and a moment later he stood in the presence of the Empress.

He was in the middle of his formal bow when she moved quickly across the room towards him, a tall and haggard woman. She was not dressed to receive an official visit. She wore a long cloak—for the room was not warm—which, falling apart in her impetuous advance, revealed the high girdle of her gown and the straight fall of its yellow silk to her feet.

'Never mind that,' she said. 'I did not send for Fouché, the Minister. I sent for an old friend.'

She stretched out her hands to him. Though her agitation was extreme, every movement was graceful.

He took the offered hands. The urgent grip of her fingers surprised him. This woman would melt a stone. He had some difficulty in releasing himself. When he had done so, he stepped back and completed his bow.

But she did not again notice his behaviour. She was too full of her present trouble.

‘The Walewska is in Paris!’

The rouge on her cheeks stood out, startlingly distinct, like the first flush of red on ripening apples. The rest of the face was white, with an almost greenish tinge, and the wide, dark eyes were full of sweet pity for herself.

‘I expected a scene,’ thought Fouché. ‘I think I am going to get it.’

Aloud he said:

‘Calm yourself, Majesty, I beg.’

‘Walewska is in Paris,’ repeated Josephine. ‘She arrived at noon today. Bonaparte is with her now.’

Fouché straightened himself and, offering his hand, led her to a couch at the further end of the small room. He himself sat down on a chair beside her.

‘You sent for me as an old friend,’ he prompted respectfully. ‘That was most kind and generous. I am happy to think that you can still see me in that light in spite of the advice which I have more than once felt obliged to offer.’

‘You have been known to change your views,’ she said softly.

‘Never without good reason, Majesty.’

‘I sent for you as a friend,’ she repeated. ‘Am I rejected?’

Her voice had dropped to the husky, seductive note which she kept for her lovers; but he was not impressed. He had no need to stop his ears against the sirens.

‘I am still Your Majesty’s friend,’ he answered gravely. ‘And I was never so devoted as when I dared to suggest a step which is necessary for your own security and the welfare of France.’

‘ You would still persuade me that I should no longer be Bonaparte’s wife?’

‘ I think it necessary that the Emperor should have an heir.’

‘ You think it possible for him to have a son?’

‘ I incline to that belief.’

Josephine sat back against the green silk cushions. The full mouth, with its pointed corners, was trembling.

‘ It is not my fault that I cannot bear him children,’ she said. ‘ I am not a barren woman. I have a son and daughter to prove it. I am only forty-three. Why should I sacrifice my position when I do not even know that someone else would be more successful in my place? Is there even a reason why I should not hope to have a child by him myself?’

‘ Your Majesty alone can judge of that,’ said Fouché bowing slightly.

Josephine sprang up, her fingers clenched. He noted dispassionately that one of the fine sinews in her neck was twitching.

‘ What if I told you that I have good reason to expect a child?’ she asked.

‘ I should in that case advise Your Majesty to have your hopes confirmed. A statement from Your Majesty’s physician would set all minds at rest, and I need hardly say that, as an old friend, I should be only too glad of this unexpected solution.’

For a moment he wondered what she would do: lose all control and rail at him, as on that summer day at Fontainebleau, fall into a passion of tears, overwhelm him with reproaches, arguments, entreaties? The moment passed. She flung herself back on the couch, her eyes half shut. He knew the symptoms. She had decided to control herself and he waited patiently. Presently the pointed corners of her mouth

went up in a bitter smile. The crisis was over and she would begin to be rational.

She opened her eyes and looked at him without moving.

‘I am tired, Fouché; tired of it all.’

He waited a moment and then said:

‘Your Majesty referred to the arrival in Paris of Madame Walewska. Tell me frankly what is in your mind. There is a point on which, for reasons of policy, we must agree to differ, but I am still your friend within limits which we can both of us accept.’

‘You knew, of course, that Bonaparte had sent for Walewska?’

‘It is my business to be well informed.’

‘You know everything, Fouché. Tell me, what is behind it?’

‘You flatter me, Majesty.’

‘For God’s sake, Fouché, don’t talk to me as though you were here on duty. Bonaparte is starting for Bayonne. I have not yet been told whether he wants me to go with him. Does he mean to take this Polish woman?’

‘I do not know, but, if he wishes to do so, we cannot prevent it.’

‘I have heard it said that you favour a Russian alliance. The gossips are singing the praises of a Russian lady, Alexander’s sister.’

‘I am not responsible for what the gossips may say or sing.’

Josephine laid a friendly hand on the stiff embroidered sleeve of his coat. She smiled at him reproachfully.

‘Friend within limits, I think you said. Everyone knows that rumours for which the Minister of Police is not responsible seldom live long.’

'I have no knowledge of what the Emperor may have in mind, but a Russian alliance would secure him more firmly in his seat than any other solution which has yet occurred to me. Walewska is in Paris. You do not like it. Perhaps I like it even less than you do.'

Josephine looked at him almost triumphantly.

'That is frank, my friend within limits. But do not talk to me as though it hurt you to be honest. You are working for a Russian match. In that case we can work together. Petersburg is far away. But the Walewska is here at our very door. I am driven to live from day to day, and I face my problems as and when they come home to me. Has it occurred to you that Bonaparte may offer to marry Walewska?'

'What reason, dear lady, have you to imagine such a thing?'

'I was asking whether it had occurred to you.'

'Everything is possible.'

'Then you must help me to prevent it. What can come of such a match? Not even a child, perhaps. Bonaparte has tried often enough, as you know. I have not been the only woman in his life.'

'There was Eleanor Denelle,' said Fouché, looking at the ceiling. 'Her son's name is Léon. A healthy boy, I am told.'

Josephine looked at him keenly. A light flush stained her cheeks, but a sly look, not without a touch of loose merriment, was in her eyes.

'Tell Murat when you see him next. You might also say that the boy is remarkably like him.'

'I am credibly informed that such features as he possesses already suggest a typical little Corsican.'

Fouché paused and looked keenly at the Empress.

'Come, dear lady,' he said dropping to an abrupt familiarity. 'It was clever to suggest a doubt, but I

am convinced that in this case the Emperor did at last succeed.'

Josephine shrugged her shoulders.

'As you please,' she said. 'But Bonaparte is not altogether sure, which is all that matters.'

Fouché sat motionless for a moment. Josephine was still the wife of Napoleon. There was no reason why he should offend her.

'I do not think,' he said at last, 'that the Emperor is thinking of marrying Walewska. I do not think he will marry any woman till he can be sure of an heir and I am inclined to believe that here we may discover one of the reasons why he asked Walewska to come to Paris. He will look to her for a proof that he can become a father.'

'The woman is young?'

'Twenty years of age.'

'And beautiful?'

'So it is reported.'

'Then it ought not to be difficult to spoil the experiment,' said Josephine, looking inwardly at some project of her own.

Fouché looked at her a moment, not catching her drift.

'It ought not to be difficult,' repeated Josephine. 'Bonaparte is a tedious lover and she, presumably, is not a saint.'

She laughed suddenly.

Fouché smiled in sympathy.

'Eleanor has confessed that he bored her so profoundly that, when he visited her, she used to put the clock forward so that she might sooner be released.'

'You think Walewska may have too much of him?'

'I mean more than that,' reported Josephine, and the voice again took on a husky, sensual note. 'I presume

the Polish charmer is a woman of flesh and blood. One may have too much of Bonaparte and yet it may not be enough.'

Fouché shook his head ever so slightly.

'Walewska may be less exacting in these matters than Eleanor Denelle. Moreover, she also has the reputation of being a fervent Catholic and a virtuous woman in so far as her love for Napoleon allows her to be.'

Josephine raised her shoulders.

'How did she come to Paris?' she asked. 'She was well looked after, I take it.'

'The mission was entrusted to one of the Marbots, Felix by name. You shall have full particulars by to-morrow morning.'

Josephine caught him by the arm.

'You will help me in this matter?'

Her voice was low and eager, and the upper lip, with the fine down upon it, trembled.

'Full particulars,' Fouché repeated.

He paused a moment and added:

'I do not think it will be as easy as you think to spoil the Emperor's experiment. But I am perfectly willing, shall we say, to explore the ground?'

Josephine was all assent and eagerness.

'Get at young Marbot,' she said. 'See the woman yourself. They went across Europe together. They must be on pretty good terms. They are both very young. Arrange it, Fouché. Remember that it doesn't matter what really happens or may have happened. It only matters that Bonaparte should think there is something between them. You are to do it, Fouché, do you hear? You are to do it.'

The hand clasping his wrist was shaking.

'I will do my best,' said Fouché. 'Meanwhile it

would be a good thing if you seemed not to know that Walewska was in Paris.'

'The whole town will know of it tomorrow,' objected the Empress impatiently. 'Am I to seem a fool?'

'It is often not a bad thing to seem a fool, dear lady. I have adopted that policy more than once. It saved me from the guillotine in '94, and I sometimes wonder whether I should survive for long in my present office if I did not sometimes encourage my enemies to underestimate my talents.'

There came a discreet knock upon the door. Josephine sat back.

'Come in,' she called.

The door opened and a woman stood on the threshold.

'What is it, Lucienne?' she asked.

The woman crossed the room and, with a deep curtsy, handed Josephine a small scrap of paper. She unfolded it, displaying a few lines in an almost illegible hand.

Fouché knew the scrawl well. Josephine read it and her face changed. Her eyes shone. She rose from the couch as Fouché, too, got stiffly to his feet.

'He starts for Bayonne on April second,' she said in a voice full of triumph, 'and I am to go with him. This means that Walewska will remain in Paris. I leave her to you, Fouché. I leave her to you.'

Then, as Fouché stood preparing to take his leave, she turned and flung herself in a passion of weeping on the couch.

Fouché stood a moment looking down at her and then moved quietly to the door.

CHAPTER III

MARIE WALEWSKA looked again at the gilt-and-marble clock which stood on the chimney-piece in the form of an antique boundary stone. It was difficult to tell the hour. The artist in his elaboration of its brazen face had defeated the purpose of a clock, which is to tell the time.

She walked towards it and discovered the gilt hands standing close together. It was five minutes to eleven.

She began to walk restlessly about the room. He would be with her at any moment now. He must be already on his way from the Tuileries, with Duroc by his side.

Already she had felt his presence in the care he had taken for her reception. There were flowers in a vase beside the clock. Marie smiled at her thoughts. Napoleon at Warsaw had sent her flowers and begged her to wear them: he would put his hand to his heart to show that it was beating for her and she, in answer, was to touch his gift. She had not worn the flowers, for with them he had sent her jewels. Napoleon was incorrigible. Just as he had sent her jewels with his flowers at Warsaw, spoiling his gift, so now he must still overbear her with riches. She had come to find Napoleon and she had found a house prepared to receive the mistress of an Emperor.

She should, perhaps, be moved and flattered.

Marysia had exclaimed with delight when first they had examined the house together some hours before, and certainly this oblong room, with the gracious curve of window swelling to the quiet courtyard beneath, was a welcome change from the bumpkin splendours of her own town house in Warsaw, with its bad imitation Boucher ceilings and the heavily lacquered Venetian furniture which the old Count had brought back from Venice in the seventies, years before she had been born. This room was the work of an artist.

Whose work could it be? Not of Napoleon himself, who had no skill in these matters. The carpet, as soft to the eye as to the touch, tempted her feet from their slippers. On the walls hung six Savonnerie tapestries of Flora and the Golden Age. There were looped curtains of stiff taffeta and furniture of wine-dark mahogany with sphinx heads and griffin claws and a bed in shape of a swan with hangings of the finest muslin. She had but just now come from a bathroom where the water ran from the mouths of two dolphins into a marble slab hollowed to receive her body, where the walls were of glass, painted with little loves entwined with flowers.

She had shrunk at first from this magnificence. Fifteen months ago she would have left the house, just as she had refused at Warsaw to wear the Emperor's jewels. But the time for such gestures was past. For better or worse she was mistress of the man who by turns thrilled, soothed or trampled her and who yet, in some strange way, was pitiful.

She looked into the mirror and surveyed the result of her preparations. She saw a woman wearing a flounced dressing-gown of white silk, with a girdle of silver cord. Beneath it she was naked from the bath, but upon her feet were slippers of swan's-down.

Her golden hair was caught in a loose knot and flowed a little past her shoulders.

How should she receive him? Why had he sent for her? It had been agreed between them that, as he was not yet able to restore the kingdom of Poland without giving mortal offence to his Russian friends, she would not, for the sake of his security and peace, come to Paris till the position should change and her coming might be of service.

From behind her, as she stood by the mirror, came a muffled step and the smooth sound of a lock. She turned round, her heart beating fast, and looked towards a tall press standing in the corner. Its doors opened upon a narrow staircase that went down to the paved hall below, just such a staircase, so Marysia had told her, as in the Tuileries led from the Emperor's cabinet to the bedroom of the Empress.

The doors were thrown wide and the Emperor stepped forward.

'Marie,' he said, and jerked his grey cloak to the floor behind him. His hat fell beside it and he moved towards her, his hands thrust forward and his white breeches gleaming in the candle-light against the dark green of his coat. There was a lock of hair across his forehead. His eyes were shining.

She felt his cuff, stiff against her shoulder-blade, as his arm went round her; the pommel of his sword was bruising her side.

She was bent back. One bright eye was very close. She struggled in his grasp.

'Marie, what is it?'

He bent his head, kissing her right hand. She looked down upon him a moment and with a finger stroked his hair, lank and smooth.

'It's getting thin, Napoleon,' she heard herself saying.

The head rose abruptly. His eyes, so luminous a moment before, were half covered by the olive lids.

‘Have you come a thousand miles to tell me that?’ he asked.

He bent again swiftly, his head between the parting of her dressing-gown. She felt the rasp of his clean-shaven upper lip against her skin. A stifled murmur came from his lips and she stood motionless.

He raised his head suddenly. All his movements were abrupt, almost ungainly. He took her by the wrists and drew her gently to the couch.

‘Are you not pleased to see me, Marie? It has been too long. It must never be so long again.’

She sat beside him on the couch. He still held one of her hands, but he was looking critically round the room.

‘How do you like it?’ he asked in a change of mood as abrupt as his movements. ‘Is it all as you wish? Is there anything you want to change?’

She looked at him and smiled.

‘Did you choose it all yourself, Napoleon?’

‘I gave very precise instructions,’ he said shortly. ‘Fouché took the house for me.’

‘Does he, then, know that I am here?’

‘He was not informed. But Fouché informs himself.’

‘It is nothing to do with him,’ she protested warmly.

‘You shall see him, sweetheart. I will order him to wait upon you. You shall tell him to mind his own business. I repeatedly tell him to do so. But he is the only man in France who pays no attention to me. I appointed a Minister of Police and discovered that I had three ministers in one. Some day I shall find him raising an army. What am I to do with such a man?’

‘Dismiss him if he is disobedient and dangerous.’

'Less dangerous than the fool I should put in his place. He has got the best brain in France.'

He broke off suddenly.

'It was Pauline who chose all these things. She is the only member of my family with good taste.'

He smiled and laid a hand on her knee.

'Do you like it? Is everything all right?'

But again he did not wait for an answer.

'Marie,' he whispered. 'It is good to see you. It is more than good. It is perfection. Here I can give you what you need.'

Restlessly he sprang to his feet and began walking rapidly up and down the wide blue carpet, his hands gripped firmly behind his back, his head slightly forward, in an attitude which was poignantly familiar and yet made him seem a stranger.

'You are here in Paris where men have learned to live. It is your own. It is waiting to please you. What will you do tomorrow? We will have Talma for you at the Français. Or would you prefer the Opéra? Chevalier is singing this week in Spontini's *Vestale*. You shall wear Lyons velvet and that new gold brocade which will go so well with your hair. Leroy will see to it. Send me the bills, Marie, and if the scoundrel overcharges——'

She interrupted him suddenly.

'Stop,' she cried out. 'Can't you see that all this is impossible?'

He stopped his pacing and faced her.

'I am not your Empress, Napoleon.'

He looked at her impatiently, unbuckling his sword and threw it on the floor.

'God, Marie, the man or woman who raised so much as an eyebrow would not see France again.'

Walewska sighed.

‘Of course,’ she said patiently. ‘No one would raise an eyebrow. But you cannot control their thoughts.’

‘Does it matter what they think?’ he asked.

‘It does not matter to me,’ she said. ‘But I have not come here to be forced on the town. I do not wish to be received and flattered. It would mean nothing to me. What could it mean to you—nothing to your heart; something, perhaps, to your vanity. Is that what I mean to you, Napoleon?’

He fell on his knees beside her and thrust his head into her lap.

‘Marie,’ he said, ‘you know it is more than that.’

He took her by the wrists and looked at her in a puzzled exasperation.

‘It is always like this,’ he said. ‘I come to you for a little joy, a little happiness. And we talk. We talk endlessly.’

He rose from his knees with such suddenness that he staggered back against a small table which stood just behind him, and his hand, thrust out to balance his movement, swept a small casket to the floor. It fell open and a handful of letters were scattered on the carpet. He bent down to pick them up but Marie put a hand upon his arm.

‘Never mind the letters.’

‘Letters?’ he said quickly.

‘Your letters to me.’

He unfolded a sheet of paper and read: ‘I saw nobody but you; I admired nobody but you; I want nobody but you. Please answer at once and calm the eager passion of—N.’

He looked up from the letter.

‘Did I write that?’

‘You do not remember it?’

‘You sent me no reply to that message, Marie.’

He dropped the sheet upon the floor and picked up another.

'Come to me,' he read. 'All your wishes shall be gratified. Your native land will be dearer to me when you have taken pity on my poor heart.'

He threw the sheet violently upon the table.

'Still the little patriot of Bronie?' he said. 'Are we, then, to talk politics for the rest of the night? What more can I do for Poland? There is a grand duchy of Warsaw. Am I to make it a kingdom? You know it is impossible. Alexander would never agree to it.'

He resumed his pacing of the room.

'You are always talking to me of Poland,' he continued. 'Let your Poles show themselves to be men. Let them fight for their freedom.'

'They are fighting already, but not for themselves. You are using them for your own ends, Napoleon.'

'I asked them for an army. There are eight thousand Polish troopers in Spain. There are seven thousand in Germany. Your countrymen could put sixty thousand men into the field. I pledged myself to restore Polish independence if they raised but half that number. Do you accuse me of breaking faith? At Warsaw you seemed to understand. Poland, we agreed, must wait. For the sake of peace we must be patient.'

He turned and found her facing him. Her eyes were bright, indignant, accusing.

'Where is the peace that you promised? Why are your armies in Spain?'

'Marie, why do you bother me with politics at this hour?'

His voice was almost pleading, but she had gone too far to withdraw. The appeal must be made.

‘ You destroyed your enemies at Austerlitz. You destroyed them again at Jena. You defeated them at Eylau and at Friedland. Will you never be satisfied? You promised that my country should be dear to you, but I stopped pleading for Poland in the hope that you might have peace at last. But what do I hear next? That you are preparing for another war. You refused to restore my country as a free kingdom, but it is said that you intend to create a vassal kingdom in Spain? ’

He looked at her, wary, but with a hint of mockery in his eyes.

‘ You are well informed, sweetheart. But your information is premature. It is also inconvenient. Who tells you what I intend to do? ’

‘ You have reminded me that there are eight thousand Polish horse in Spain. There are friends of mine among them. ’

‘ Their correspondence appears to be inadequately censored. I will look into the matter. ’

‘ I want to know the truth, Napoleon. ’

The anger within her enabled her to disregard his mockery, though her heart was beating fast again. He was looking at her oddly.

‘ So my little Marie wants to know the truth. She is still so very young that, in her simplicity, she wants to know the truth. ’

He burst into loud laughter, but she looked at him steadily. How could he laugh in that violent Italian manner? His eyes had narrowed and he had a common thrust to his jaw. He was gross for the moment, no longer terrible.

He stepped forward and took hold of her wrists.

‘ What do you know of politics? ’

His arm went round her and his free hand slipped beneath her robe.

‘Smooth and cool,’ he murmured. ‘You are very sweet, but very tiresome.’

He smacked her cheek with two fingers and she felt herself yielding. But she would not give way to that strange assault.

He broke away and began to pace the room.

‘When you reach my age, Marie, you will have learned that it is difficult to know the truth. We often want to grasp it, but, as we do so, it changes its shape. Truth is for the idealist. Once I thought I held it. That was when I was a captain of gunners in an army where the guns were few and the men did not know how to use them. Captain Cannon they called me then. Ideals are strange things. We play with them as children play with toys, cutting our fingers. My ideals remained with me when I was a general, loyal to the Republic. They helped me to transform a rabble, without a decent coat or a sound pair of boots among them, into an army of heroes. But I had either to abandon my ideals or confine myself within the limits which they imposed, and now I look into my own intelligence for the shape of things to come. For me there is no limitation. A million men may die, but I shall shoulder Christ from the highest niche of fame.’

She stared in dejected astonishment at the short, stocky figure striding up and down the room. She saw him as a puppet jerking to hidden strings, but with a dreadful likeness to human life. There was a man somewhere beneath this display to whom she wished to bring comfort and sanity. But how was she ever to reach him?

‘Well?’ he said, suddenly turning upon her. ‘You don’t speak to me, Marie.’

She spread wide her hands.

‘What is the use?’ she burst out. ‘When you are in this mood, the words you say are nothing. How am I to answer when I cannot hear you? I can only listen if you will be a man as other men.’

Her voice dropped to a low note.

‘But you have made yourself into a walking shadow that grows ever taller as the sun goes down.’

He came to her swiftly and took her by the hand.

‘Marie,’ he said, ‘I am losing you. What do you want me to say? You talk to me of peace. Believe me, at Warsaw I was working for peace. But the English who refused to treat with me seven years ago have made peace impossible. Terrible things have happened since we parted at Finkenstein. The English fleet has bombarded Copenhagen. The English have stolen the Danish ships. I prefer not to dwell upon this horrible crime, but think what it means. There can be no peace with England. The English Parliament has decided to carry on the war. That is why I am going to Spain. I hoped it would not be necessary. But Portugal would not break her alliance with England. I offered Portugal to Charles, but Charles had not brains enough to see that he must work with me, or character enough to control even his own family. The Spanish royal house is a scandal. Charles is a cipher. His queen is an abomination. I have summoned them to Bayonne. I shall go to meet them in a day or two. It is all arranged. My brother Joseph must be King of Spain. I should prefer to see Lucien at Madrid, but he will never listen. Or perhaps I shall leave Joseph in Naples. Louis shall be King of Spain. The Dutch climate doesn’t suit him and he has no understanding of the people. I will bring him down from the mud-flats where he blunders and is bored to death. Voltaire

was right—*canards, canaux, canaille*. There is nothing to be expected from such a country. He will do better in Spain and that will be another corner of Europe cleaned up. Junot is in Portugal and the Braganza carrion have floated out to sea. That will mean more ports, more harbours closed to England.'

Marie made a slight wringing motion with her hands.

'Another kingdom to hold down. Will it never end?'

There followed a silence. Napoleon stood motionless, like a man looking at something far away, and yet within himself. For a moment he seemed to have forgotten her. Then abruptly he passed a hand across his forehead.

'Why am I here?' she asked. 'Why did you send for me?'

He considered her a moment.

'The Russian merchants are pressing Alexander to restore their trade with England. The Russian nobility support the merchants. Alexander is afraid of his own people. At any moment he may open his ports to the English ships. I must therefore frighten him. The kingdom of Poland is not yet created, but already it has its ambassador in Paris, the Countess Marie Walewska, envoy extraordinary, of whom it is commonly said that I can refuse her nothing. Alexander has already heard of your coming. It will give him food for reflection.'

He nodded at her. He was sly, triumphant and looking for approval, but she saw him helpless, entangled, incorrigible. Indignation and pity divided her mind.

'You care nothing for Poland,' she protested. 'If Alexander is your friend and must be flattered

Poland is his fee. If Alexander wavers and must be frightened, Poland is encouraged to be strong so that she may, some day perhaps, be rid of him. You play with men and nations as though you were God in heaven.'

He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. Was it a menace or did it convey a helpless submission to events?

'The moment I cease to impose myself on the world, it will destroy me. You have your religion, Marie. Pray to your God. Pray the ships of England from the sea. Pray the money from her banks. Pray the stubborn cabinets of Europe into reason and mercy. Pray that I may be set free to make my people happy.'

He stepped towards her. Gently, almost timidly, he took her hand again. He had begun his appeal in bitterness, but he ended on a pleading note.

She saw before her a man who needed rest and security, and she knew that her resistance, if ever she had intended to resist, was at an end. She now had only one wish: to feel him close, dependent, stripped of his attitudes and cares.

His arms were about her. She saw the hunger in his eyes, felt the desire in his hands.

'Forget everything,' he stammered, 'except that I love you. Everything else has an end—beauty, feeling, the sun itself.'

In an agony of love and compassion she clung to him and prayed that he, too, might lose himself—as she was lost.

CHAPTER IV

§ 1

‘PUT it away,’ said Felix. ‘Tonight I am paying for my friends.’

He pushed back in high good humour the lean purse offered by his near companion. His stock was a little tight, but presently he would loosen it. He surveyed his two friends with an indulgent eye. They were his children. He had filled them with food and wine. They were full of good things consumed at his expense. He was the fountain of pleasure and good living. Gaston, long and muscular, wore proudly the uniform of a sub-lieutenant of dragoons, and Jacques, from St. Cyr, was not unconscious of the figure he made in his cadet’s uniform.

It was past eleven o’clock and they had just returned from the Variétés. At six o’clock they had dined at Véry’s and that was a thing to remember. Gaston had suggested Lambert in the Rue de Richelieu and Jacques had declared that Champeaux served a very reasonable dinner in the Rue de Chartre. But Felix had scouted the notion of dining reasonably anywhere. For that very morning he had received from Duroc a sum of two thousand francs, with commendations and a hint of further employment.

First he had bought a new hat for his mother and,

for his two sisters, some Lyons silk to make a dress. His mother had kissed him in the shop, much to his embarrassment; but Madame Déspeaux, who was wiser even than the famous Leroy in the matter of hats, had applauded the act. Thereupon Felix had tried, unsuccessfully, to kiss Mademoiselle Annette, to whom all Paris went for advice as to how the feathers should hang from a bonnet.

He had met Gaston and Jacques, quite by accident, in the early evening. Then and there he had suggested a party and his two friends had accepted with enthusiasm.

They had seen and cheered Cambacérès at the Variétés. Cambacérès, these days, seldom spent his evenings anywhere else. Everyone knew of his passion for Mademoiselle Montansier. The Emperor, with a malicious eye upon his Arch-Chancellor, had declared her to be the toast of all the old bachelors of Paris. Everyone had repeated the saying and laughed at it, for the Emperor himself had laughed and it was not seemly that the Emperor should laugh alone.

On leaving the theatre they had returned to the Palais Royal, and now they were drinking lemonade to steady their heads in the Café of a Thousand Columns. La Romaine was serving them herself, the prettiest Hebe in Paris.

It was pleasant to sit and watch the people. The night was not really cold, though they were glad of their cloaks. Their big hats lay on a chair beside them. They seemed to be sitting in a forest of pillars, for the walls of the café were lined with mirrors and the colonnade spread into infinity.

Felix, looking into the mirror, lost himself in speculation. How far could he see? How many pillars could he count? What was the difference

between reality and that world in the mirror?

Jacques touched his foot. Felix looked up. Three girls in black bonnets were passing. The tall Gaston leaned forward.

'They are nothing,' he said solemnly. 'Now when I was in Warsaw . . .'

Jacques raised a hand to cover a nascent yawn.

'We have heard all that so often,' he complained. 'She was big and beautiful and she loved you dearly. And the landlord complained that you had broken the bed.'

He turned to Felix.

'Gaston has been intolerable since he came back from Poland, though he never even saw the Walewska. Tell us about her, Felix.'

Felix smiled.

'There is nothing to tell,' he said.

Jacques nodded his head wisely.

'I understand you. Sealed orders. Absolute discretion. But we could, if we liked—isn't that it?'

'Not a word from me,' said Felix. 'If you want to know what happens in Warsaw, listen to Gaston.'

'In Warsaw,' began Gaston.

'Paris for me,' interrupted Felix, waving his hand with a sweeping gesture at the crowd.

Tomorrow he would have to write his letter to the Emperor. He would beg to be admitted to the officers' school at St. Cyr. That modest petition could scarcely be refused after he had brought Walewska safe to Paris from the other end of Europe. Meanwhile here was a spectacle to warm the heart.

The girls in the black bonnets were hesitating between a brace of tall grenadiers and a bunch of light cavalymen in blue and green.

There came an eddy in the crowd which parted suddenly.

‘ Here comes the Old Bachelor! ’

The cry came hoarsely from a stout cavalryman with a glass of brandy in front of him and a diagonal scar running across his cheek.

Felix looked to see the occasion of his remark and beheld again the Arch-Chancellor of the Empire, Cambacérès himself, moving in stately fashion down the colonnade. Two chamberlains walked on either side of him. At a distance followed his two secretaries, Momvel and Lavallée. Then came Bonet de Freychs, of the Convention, and the lawyer Noel, who carried himself like a man who felt it necessary to be present, but was anxious to avoid attention. Behind them streamed a retinue of friends and clients.

The Arch-Chancellor was very splendidly dressed. A blue velvet coat, heavily embroidered with gold, hung from his ample shoulders. Beneath it gleamed white breeches, and his huge calves filled a pair of white stockings of the finest Lyons silk. His hat, which he carried in his hand, was covered with a profusion of plumes and a voluminous stock burgeoned at his throat. His red face shone like a ruddy coal. From time to time he inclined his head from right to left and smiled languidly upon the bystanders. From a table in the Café Corazza near by came a burst of ironical applause.

‘ He has dined well tonight,’ observed Gaston.

‘ We have also dined,’ said Jacques.

‘ We have dined,’ admitted Felix. ‘ But that is only a prologue. We will now go to the Strangers’ Room in the Hôtel d’Augny. There we can dance. It will be amusing there.’

The three men rose and the waiter came forward. Felix rang a demi-napoleon upon the table and, with a magnificent sweep of the hand, refused the change.

§ 2

They walked out beneath the colonnade, Felix in the centre with his arms held affectionately by his two companions. They had left the Palais Royal and were moving towards the Chaussée d'Antin. They soon reached their destination.

The hall was large and very hot. It was packed with people. Most of them were soldiers: dragoons in blue and green, hussars in green, red and yellow, lancers in scarlet and gold; while in a corner Felix noted an officer of the guard in blue and white, very drunk, disputing with a lackey dressed in a curious livery of oiled silk and armed with a pair of snuffers.

There were girls in plenty and here and there a woman of quality. Everyone was dancing in the heat and glitter of the wax candles.

Felix soon lost sight of his friends. Here it was each man for himself and for the moment he did not wish for company. He wanted to see the show and made his way to the front of the crowd that watched the dancing. He had not yet come within view of the floor, however, before he saw, within a few paces of where he was standing, a man he recognised.

He had met Philip de Ségur that morning. De Ségur was the Emperor's billeting officer and together they had waited to see Duroc and had fallen into conversation while kicking their heels in the ante-room of the Grand Marshal. Felix had found himself confiding to this new acquaintance, with the warm, friendly eyes and rather serious manner, his hopes of military service.

He flushed with pleasure now as de Ségur edged towards him with a smile. This was the sort of man he would wish to be, well on the way to fortune at

twenty-six but with no false airs.

De Ségur took him by the arm.

'This is a lucky chance,' he said easily. 'I saw Duroc this morning immediately after you left and I thought it a good moment to let him know that we had met. He spoke well of your services. But don't be in too great a hurry. You are carrying out your present duties too well to be relieved of them just yet.'

'Of course,' stammered Felix. 'I only want to serve the Emperor.'

Philip de Ségur looked at him with candid approval.

'Have you any news of your brother, Marcellin? Duroc told me that he was in Spain.'

'Not a word.'

'I met him here in Paris. It must be six years ago. There was no Emperor in those days. There was France and there was the Revolution. I remember him asking me—he is a terrible, blunt man, your brother—how I came to serve Napoleon. For Napoleon in those days was the Revolution, and to us, whom the Revolution had destroyed, there seemed nothing to which we could give our allegiance.'

'But now it is different.'

De Ségur smiled.

'I wanted to serve France. I remain to serve the Emperor.'

He broke off as the music, which had ceased some moments before, struck up again and the dancers thronged to the floor. Felix was aware of a friendly pressure on his elbow.

'Goodbye, Felix,' said de Ségur, 'and good luck.'

Already he was moving away.

'Goodbye, Philip,' responded Felix, flushing to be so familiar.

He turned to find at his elbow a brunette with a pale

face, dark eyes and a vivid mouth. He looked at her doubtfully, for this apparently was one of the quality. Nevertheless she smiled at him kindly and soon they were twisting to the triple rhythm of the new Viennese waltz. Felix had learned it only six weeks before.

'How well you dance,' she said as the music stopped.

'Dancing with you,' said Felix, 'makes a false step impossible.'

He bowed gallantly as he spoke and was the more disconcerted when, unexpectedly, she retorted:

'With you, sir, a false step would perhaps be amusing.'

She thrust a slim hand beneath his elbow.

The high, semi-transparent frock showed her off to perfection. Felix looked at her with approval and, since it appeared that there was no need for him to treat her distantly, he bent to her ear and whispered:

*'D'un tissu trop clair, trop léger,
Ces belles Grecques sont vêtues;
Un souffle peut le déranger
Et nous les montrer toutes nues.'*

'You are impertinent,' she said, 'but in this room there is hardly a breath of air. So you will almost certainly be disappointed.'

Squeezing his arm, she pushed him out of the big hall into the gaming-room.

They stood a moment watching the play.

'Will you put on something for me?' she urged.

Felix nodded. It was a long low room, crowded with all sorts and conditions. Here civilians predominated; for soldiers, reflected Felix, hadn't the money to burn. The men, like himself, were mostly clad in knee-breeches and silk stockings, with blue cut-away coats and lace at the throat.

At the end of the green baize table, which ran down the centre of the room, a short fat man was seated. This was the Marquis de Livry, who himself was directing the play. Behind his chair stood Mademoiselle Saulnier, late of the Opéra, whom he had married in order to give distinction to the place.

Felix stood watching for some time. They were playing quarante and there appeared to be no limit. An old man, his face withered as parchment, was leaning across the table. Felix saw him pick up a chip to the value of five thousand francs.

‘Too high for me,’ said Felix.

At that moment came a clash of cymbals and a loud wailing from the violins outside, but the gamblers paid no heed. None of them so much as turned a head. The flip-flap of the cards continued and the monotonous calling of the Marquis de Livry.

‘Put on your stakes, ladies and gentlemen! Stake high. Stake often.’

Felix, attracted by the music, turned away.

‘It is La Bigottini and Miller,’ whispered the woman beside him. ‘They are going to dance.’

The ballroom, Felix discovered, had been partly cleared of dancers, but the press round the walls was tremendous. He therefore remained under the archway which led to the gaming-room, pushed against the lintel of the door and unable to move. He slipped an arm around his partner and felt her yield to his pressure. In the centre of the room, beneath the candles, two insubstantial figures had floated, bubbles of the earth and seeming, each time they touched the polished floor, to derive fresh strength with which to spring again into the air. The woman, wearing nothing but a gauze robe of the finest white muslin, wheeled and floated in the arms of Miller, who stood in the middle

of the floor, naked except for a leopard skin across his splendid chest, artificially tanned.

'She puts her frock on damp,' whispered the brunette into the ear of Felix. 'It is an old trick. See how it clings.'

But Felix was all eyes for the spectacle. He could have sworn that La Bigottini had no weight at all as she drifted towards her partner, to be raised and held in a perfect gesture. Then he saw the muscles upon the man's shoulders and forearm tighten under the strain so artfully concealed. As he raised her up, he cried out upon a deep note that sounded a dominant to a pedal on the double basses and the music of Lulli flowed in triple time.

It was at that moment that Felix became aware of a hand touching his shoulder.

'Please come with me at once, sir,' said a voice in his ear.

§ 3

Felix turned and looked at the speaker. It was a lackey dressed in an oiled canvas coat and holding in his hand a snuffer, one of the many who wandered round the room tending the candles.

'Can't you see that I am engaged?' said Felix haughtily.

'I am sorry,' said the man quietly, 'but I must beg you to come.'

He exhibited, as he spoke, a small disc of metal. On it was inscribed a number and the words: Secret Police. Ministerial Service.

The woman had also seen the disc. She looked at Felix distrustfully and disengaged herself from his arm.

'Better go,' she urged.

Felix followed the lackey into the gaming-room.

The man in his gleaming livery—for the oiled canvas gave him an odd, glistening appearance—led the way with humble back, the perfect image of an obsequious servant conducting a young gentleman of fashion to the buffet, perhaps, or to the privy. No one took any notice of them as they passed into an ante-room.

The lackey paused and lifted a curtain of red damask stamped with sphinxes. He stood aside for Felix to pass.

Felix found himself at the top of a winding stair, short and steep, carpeted in brown felt. At the bottom stood another lackey. When he was half-way down the stair, a door opened beneath and there came a sharp uprush of air, cold and penetrating after the heat of the rooms.

Something heavy was flung about his shoulders.

‘Your cloak, sir,’ said a voice in his ear. ‘Your hat and cane.’

Felix, receiving these objects, continued to descend the stairway. The second lackey, who waited below, pulled open the door of a hackney coach and a familiar odour of worn cushions and stale air, suddenly released, met Felix as he climbed into the vehicle. The door was shut upon him and the carriage, at a smart pace, drove away.

Felix now had leisure to feel bewildered. Why should he be summoned like this in the middle of the night? What offence, if any, had he committed? He had fought a duel in Munich. Or rather he had begun to fight a duel and there were strict regulations against duelling in the presence of the enemy or on special duty. But the police would hardly want to see him urgently upon so small a matter.

The carriage stopped with a jerk. The door opened and Felix stepped out into the raw air, to find he was

standing in front of an imposing house on the Quai Voltaire. The March night had turned boisterous and a rough wind was whipping the river. It caught the cloak he was wearing and whirled it about his head as he passed up some steps to a door with a burnished knocker. It was opened by a short, bald-headed man in a sober livery of grey.

‘Monsieur Felix Marbot?’ he enquired.

Felix nodded.

‘If you will be so good as to step this way, sir. The Minister will receive you in a moment.’

‘Good God,’ thought Felix, ‘I am to see Fouché himself!’

He followed the broad grey back and shining skull of the major-domo up a broad flight of stairs. The carpet was thick and soft. Upon the walls hung huge tapestries crowded with vague figures of men and horses and, at the head of the stairs, two Venetian chandeliers, each carrying fifty candles, swung in the draught from below.

A door was thrown open and Felix passed into a big room lined with books, mostly bound in white-and-gold. A fire blazed and crackled on the hearth. In the centre was a large round table of inlaid marble, supported by a pillar of mahogany standing upon the claws of a griffin. Near the fire, backed by heavy curtains of brown Venetian velvet, stood a desk. Felix approached it cautiously. This must be the library of the Minister himself, the place of which men would speak now and then, but seldom with satisfaction.

Felix came to a halt a yard in front of the desk. It shone in the candle-light very neat and burnished. He regarded it a moment, but started nervously and whipped round as a voice broke in upon him from behind.

‘ You are looking at my cylinder desk, Monsieur Marbot. A handsome piece, is it not? ’

Felix bowed. This must be Fouché who stood before him. He had often seen his picture in the shops. The Minister wore a long gown of quilted yellow satin. His head was bare and the hair upon it, Felix noted, was already thin and turning grey. From the front of the gown burst a cataract of lace, frilling the shirt which he wore beneath it.

‘ It is a novelty, ’ Fouché continued, his thin lips parting in a smile.

He walked towards the desk, his footsteps making no sound upon the thick carpet, and laid a hand caressingly upon the reddish-brown mahogany surface. He moved his hand and a rank of shelves slipped out at either end to form a platform on which papers might be laid. Then he took hold of the two brass handles attached to the roll-top and pulled it open, disclosing three drawers and three false fronts. On the writing-flap was a green leather blotter tooled in gold with a design of vases in the corners. He closed the cylinder and Felix then saw nothing but the rounded cover and, above it, the white marble top surrounded by a plain brass gallery.

‘ Simple, ’ said Fouché with satisfaction, ‘ and very convenient. ’

He paused, and added with a bleak smile that came and vanished like a stranger from his leaden face:

‘ Please sit down, Monsieur Marbot. Let me offer you a glass of Burgundy. ’

Felix, nervous and bewildered, sat down before the fire, watching the Minister as he poured the dark red wine from a glass decanter into a pair of Venetian goblets which stood on a table at his elbow.

This man in the yellow gown, with the blotched face

and hooded eyes, had been the goblin of his childhood, and he had a swift vision of his father sitting in the winged chair before the fire at home in the great hall talking to his sons, in tones instinctively lowered, of citizen Fouché. His father had been in Paris on the fatal night, fifteen years before, when the Convention, by a majority of one vote, had declared that the King should die. The night before, a friend had met Fouché in the streets of the city ostentatiously conning a speech in defence of the King's life. Next day, however, when the moment came, Fouché had walked to the rostrum and, with that same speech in his pocket, had uttered sentence of death—for so, it had seemed at the eleventh hour, the cat would jump. Thereafter Fouché had held for them all a monstrous fascination: a man of merciless calculation, shameless in his treacheries, inviting perils which somehow left him increasingly secure.

Felix saw another picture impressed by his father on his childish memory: a citizen commissioner from Paris, in threadbare coat and tricolour sash, sitting in a guarded house in Lyons above the Rhône, where, secluded from all entreaty, a faithful servant of the Revolution might decree a massacre without exposure to wailing importunities or any sound but a faint screaming of mangled wretches far off, the thudding of muskets and a thin patter of hooves as the soldiers of the Republic rode into the shambles to make an end.

'Chambertin,' came the voice of Fouché suddenly; 'a noble wine.'

Felix started from his dream. This man was now a servant of the Emperor.

Felix raised the glass and, first holding it to the light as his father had taught him to do, supped the wine with an air of understanding. The eyes of

Fouché were bent on him from under their heavy lids.

‘My congratulations, Monsieur Marbot,’ he said, with a slight upward twist of his dark brows. ‘It looks as if you know something of wine. Such knowledge is surprising in one so young. It is a subject wide and deep and I do not pretend to have mastered it. But I know that good wine is an excellent creature. It loosens the tongue and has been the key to many a private bosom. May I hope that this will establish confidence between us?’

He raised his glass as he spoke and bowed with a pinched smile on his thin lips.

‘It is a good wine,’ stammered Felix. ‘But unfortunately such perfection as this does not come my way very often, though my father, I am told, once had as good or better than this in his cellars.’

‘You are from the Corrèze, are you not?’

Felix nodded above the wine cup.

‘A fine country and it breeds fine men,’ said Fouché.

‘I am glad you think so, Excellency.’

Felix found it difficult to respond to these amenities. He had the feeling of a small mouse, allowed to run free from the playful attentions of a supple and experienced cat. Why had he been suddenly called to this interview? The man who smiled at him from that terrible, cold face, sitting among all this magnificence, had suddenly reached out his hand and collected him from among his friends. Felix had a swift vision of innumerable threads all converging upon this quiet room, jerked this way and that by the slim fingers that stroked the goblet of Venetian glass.

‘You like this glass?’ demanded Fouché.

Felix started to attention.

‘I think it very beautiful,’ he answered.

‘These goblets were made for me by Venini in

Venice. They were copied from the " Marriage Feast of Cana " by Tintoretto.'

Fouché leaned back in his chair.

' You are wondering, Monsieur Marbot, why I sent for you tonight? '

Felix bowed.

' You have only just returned from a mission, I think.'

' That is so,' Felix admitted. ' My mission, sir, was confidential,' he added rather more pointedly than he had intended.

Fouché smiled.

' But one,' he said, ' of which I was not wholly unaware. The Emperor preferred, however, to make his own arrangements. You travelled, I understand, via Munich and Strasbourg, by the southern route.'

He paused, took a sip at his wine and then continued.

' I have had reports on Madame Walewska's journey from my agents; but it occurred to me that it would be interesting to meet her escort and to receive from him a more intimate impression.'

' Impression, Excellency? '

' I should like to be assured that Madame Walewska had a comfortable journey and that she has had no cause to complain of our hospitality.'

There was a short silence. Felix looked at his wine.

' I do not know, sir, that I have anything to report,' he said at last.

' I gather that Madame Walewska is not a woman who would easily pass unnoticed. Was she not recognised at any stage of the journey? '

Felix felt the blood mounting to his face. He remembered the incident at Munich with de Lespinasse and the caustic comments of Major Dommartin.

The Minister was evidently aware of his confusion and was eyeing him shrewdly.

'On one occasion only,' he said. 'It was at Munich. There was a man who presumed to recognise her.'

Fouché nodded and the pinched smile came again to his thin lips.

'Monsieur de Lespinasse is a fortunate young man or he might now, I understand, be describing the charms of the lady to his companion shades beyond the Styx.'

'Then your Excellency knows of that affair?' said Felix.

'It is my habit to be well informed.'

'In that case, sir, I feel that any report from me would be superfluous.'

Fouché had ceased to smile and Felix was aware of a fall in the temperature.

'If that were so,' said the Minister coldly, 'I should not be asking you for a report. My time, Monsieur Marbot, is at least as valuable as yours.'

'I beg your pardon, sir. I am afraid I do not express myself very well and I have not yet understood why I am here.'

'Is it so surprising that I should be interested in Madame Walewska?'

Fouché was smiling again. His teeth, Felix noticed, were discoloured. He looked like a gorgeous marionette. Someone had pulled a string and that was why he smiled.

'I am sure you must have found it an agreeable mission,' Fouché continued.

'It is a great privilege to serve His Majesty, the Emperor.'

'A privilege which you were apparently in no great hurry to relinquish.'

Felix looked with startled eyes at the man in the chair. Had there been complaints, Imperial or otherwise, that he had not been fast enough on the road?

'Your Excellency means to suggest that I might have fulfilled my errand more quickly.'

'His Majesty has set us all a new standard in travel,' responded Fouché, looking at the ceiling.

'I am, of course, answerable to His Majesty,' said Felix a little haughtily.

Fouché shook his head slightly, as though he deprecated, but was prepared to tolerate, the hot insolence of youth.

'But not to his Minister of Police,' he murmured.

Felix blushed to the ears.

'The horses were not pressed unduly. That was Madame Walewska's wish. They were a present from the Emperor. We also turned aside and stopped at Augsburg, so that she might have some of her jewels reset.'

'Augsburg is famous for its jewellers,' said Fouché dryly.

'On the way to Kehl,' continued Felix, 'Oriflamme cast a shoe, but I doubt if such incidents can be of any interest to your Excellency.'

'The inns, Monsieur Marbot, were comfortable?'

'Very tolerable on the whole,' answered Felix.

He was now almost beyond surprise. What did it all mean?

Fouché, meanwhile, was caressing his chin. His eye rested for a moment on the face of the young man and then shifted to the table between them.

'There is no wine in your glass,' he said.

A thin hand reached for the decanter and Felix once more held a full glass.

'You met no one on the road, I suppose,' continued

Fouché. 'I mean no one, of course, who spoke with Madame Walewska or her companions?'

'No one at all,' answered Felix.

'You are quite sure of this, Monsieur Marbot. It is important.'

'I am quite sure, your Excellency.'

Again there was a short silence.

The Minister leaned back and stretched a leg. His black highly polished shoe, with its silver buckle, winked in the fire-light. Felix sipped his wine. All this was beginning to be oddly restful: a small flurry every now and then of meaningless questions, with pauses between for the warm fire-light, the fine room and the generous wine.

His eyes wandered from the books, with their gilded titles shining in the candle-light, to the soft carpet and the cylinder desk set in the half shadow and the Minister in his gorgeous yellow gown and the painted ceiling above, which showed Apollo surrounded by the nine Muses, all very substantial, naked and unashamed.

But the Minister was speaking again.

'Long journeys are tedious. But you doubtless contrived to amuse Madame Walewska? I understand that she has a simple and friendly disposition.'

Felix saw her, through a rosy mist, in the carriage sitting apart, with the Emperor's locket in her hand. Absently he replied:

'Madame Walewska was always most charming and most considerate.'

'I expect she appreciated the services you were able to render?'

'Madame Walewska was kind enough to say so. She was even kind enough to present me with a small souvenir of the journey.'

He thrust out his hand and the keen eyes of the

Minister rested a moment on a plain gold signet-ring with a half-effaced coat of arms on the bezel.

‘Gracious indeed,’ he said, and his tone was not at all dry, but cordial and unreserved. ‘Monsieur Marbot, you are a fortunate young man. I must presume that this little gift was a reward for helping your charges to pass many an hour that might otherwise have been wearisome.’

‘Madame Walewska was easily interested, easily amused.’

‘You talked with her from time to time.’

‘We talked of many things. Of riding and of that new dance, the waltz, to which Marshal Davout is so devoted, of the people who met us, of the towns we passed through; above all, of Paris which she had never seen.’

Felix felt suddenly that the strings of his tongue were unloosed. He had a warm desire to recover in words the spirit of his mission.

‘I rode beside her, or just in front of the carriage, along the wet spring roads. It was cold, sir, and very grey when we left Warsaw. But when we came to the valley of the Marne the earth was green, the birds cried from the hedges and the sun smiled at us from between the clouds.’

Felix set his glass down unsteadily on a little table beside his chair. Fouché, he noted, was gazing into the fire.

‘You are an orator, Monsieur Marbot. I seldom receive such a report as this. Fill your glass, young man. I like your enthusiasm. The Walewska is very beautiful, is she not?’

Felix leaned forward. The glass in his hand shook a little and the wine glowed with the depth and colour of a ruby.

'I have never seen anyone more beautiful than Madame Walewska.'

'Did she speak of the Emperor much?'

'Not to me, sir. But he was constantly in her thoughts.'

'But it seems that she could also think of her humble servant.'

Fouché smiled and flicked with his fingers at the ring which Felix wore.

'Her life in Warsaw, if all I hear is correct, was not a festival,' he continued. 'I understand that her husband is seventy years of age. Did she speak at all of her family?'

'Mostly of her childhood, sir. She was one of six, and her father, Monsieur Laczinski, died when she was quite young.'

'And then, of course, she found herself married to old Anastase Colonna, a very noble family.'

'She did not speak to me of her husband.'

'That is scarcely surprising,' answered Fouché. 'She has not seen him, I believe, for some time. A political marriage, it is said. She must be greatly devoted to her country. Colonna is a champion of the patriotic cause and madam is, above all things, a patriot. I am told that there was a child of the marriage.'

'So I have heard.'

'That speaks well for a husband of seventy, a remarkable old gentleman.'

Felix moved uneasily in his chair.

'A sad life for one so young, Monsieur Marbot. I feel that fate has not been kind to the lady. Having taken a husband to please her family she had surely earned the right to take a lover to please herself. But alas, I am afraid she will have to consider the state of the nation again!'

‘ You mean?’

Fouché looked aside at Felix.

‘ I will show you,’ he said.

He rose as he spoke, and went to his desk. He unlocked a drawer, extracted a file and brought it to the fireside. Turning over the leaves he removed a paper and looked at it for a moment.

‘ Monsieur Marbot,’ he said, ‘ this is a remarkable document and well worth the trouble I took to obtain an authentic copy. There was a Provisional Government in Poland when the Emperor went to Warsaw over a year ago. It decided that, for reasons of State, Madame Walewska should sacrifice herself to the Emperor as she had already sacrificed herself to Anastase. The noblemen of Poland coaxed and threatened. It is even said that the prince of patriots, Poniatowski, came to her house one night and battered upon her bedroom door. Finally these gentlemen drafted an appeal to her better nature. Read it, Monsieur Marbot.’

Felix received the document doubtfully and read:

Madam:

Great effects spring often from small causes. At every period of human existence women have exerted a decisive influence on the world’s policy. Ancient history, no less than modern, assures us of this. So long as their feelings dominate men, you will remain, ladies, one of the most formidable of all powers.

If you are a man, you ought to sacrifice your life, if need be, to the worthy and just cause of the Fatherland. If you are a woman, you cannot defend the Fatherland with your body; nature forbids that. But nature, by way of compensation, has given you other means of serving. There are sacrifices which it may be your duty to make and which you ought not to withhold, however much the making of them may cost you.

Do you suppose that it was love which drove Esther to give herself to Ahasuerus? Was not the terror which he inspired in her, a terror which caused her almost to faint when he looked at her, proof that no tender feeling animated her heart? She gave herself for the salvation of her people. For that reason her sacrifice was glorious. Shall we be able, for your glory and our happiness, to say the same of you?

Felix finished reading the paper. The writing wavered a little and the letters blended upon the page. His thoughts, like his vision, were troubled with the wine he had drunk. Why had Fouché shown him this appeal? These men had driven her into the arms of the conqueror. For reasons of State she must consent to be ravished. His imagination refused to accept it. It was false. Walewska loved the Emperor. Of that he was sure.

He looked with anger and suspicion at the figure almost prone in the chair. The legs were still stretched to the fire. The quilted dressing-gown hung in heavy folds beneath the thin, questing face with the vulpine nose.

‘Why do you give me this to read?’ he demanded suddenly. ‘It is of no account.’

‘Are you trying to tell me, young man, that Walewska is devoted to His Majesty and that I am not to regard her as a political agent?’

‘I would stake my life upon it, sir.’

‘Monsieur Marbot, you speak as one deep in this lady’s confidence. But that, perhaps, is not surprising. A moment ago I admired your enthusiasm. I shall not easily forget that most poetical procession of nights and days. Youth goes towards youth, and I see two young people riding through the spring weather and sitting late by the fireside. I see a beautiful woman, yesterday no more than a child, who first made a

political marriage and afterwards was required to sacrifice herself to a man who held in his hand the future of her country. I see her escaping for a moment from these austerities, listening by the way-side to the promptings of her heart. I see all this as a man, getting on in years, who has come to regard the attraction between men and women as no more than a lust of the blood and a permission of the will, and who has found from experience that between young people opportunity is seldom resisted.'

Felix was trying hard to follow the drift of these even sentences. Or was he trying not to understand? He passed a hand over his forehead. His head was reeling with the wine and the merry evening he had spent. Suddenly, with an instinctive gesture, his left hand went to the hilt of his sword that lay upon the chair beside him and he realised that he was trying, not very successfully, to rise to his feet.

'Excellency,' he stammered. 'I do not understand your meaning very well. Am I to conclude...'

There was a movement, very slight and dignified, from the chair opposite. The thin hand was raised towards the blaze of the fire. The face above it was hazy, but Felix could see that it smiled in gentle mockery.

'My dear young man, please sit down and do me the honour to conclude nothing at all. It is your fault if I have said anything which you could possibly misconstrue. Your enthusiasm suggested too much.'

'I still do not understand your Excellency.'

Felix felt that his mouth had gone very dry.

'It would perhaps be better if you did not try to understand. It is enough that I am satisfied.'

'Satisfied?'

‘That the Emperor is well served and that Madame Walewska is as good as she is beautiful.’

Felix was on his feet, swaying slightly and speaking with a careful precision.

‘I cannot believe that your Excellency brought me here to suggest that either my loyalty to the Emperor or the honour of Madame Walewska were under any sort of suspicion.’

Fouché had also risen. To the eyes of Felix he filled the room like a bright yellow cloud.

‘You must not misunderstand me, Monsieur Marbot. I am not the keeper of any man’s conscience, not even that of the Emperor. But I must know the men and women who serve him or come within reach of his mind or person. I must be quite sure of them, Monsieur Marbot. I do not question your fidelity or that of Madame Walewska. But a Minister of Police must leave nothing to conjecture.’

He ceased suddenly and held out his hand.

‘Forgive me for having detained you so long, Monsieur Marbot. May I send you anywhere? There is a chair waiting.’

‘Thank you, sir, but I would rather walk.’

‘Then good night, Monsieur Marbot. I hope that this will not be the last time I shall meet so loyal a servant of the Emperor.’

Felix found himself shaking the thin hand. Then he walked uncertainly across the wide room and through the olive-wood door.

Fouché turned back to the fire. He picked up the decanter of Burgundy and looked at it for a moment. Then he poured himself out a final glass.

‘A good-looking young man,’ he said to himself, ‘but I’m afraid he did not sleep with her.’

CHAPTER V

§ I

GUARDSMAN 49205, Pierre Laval, brought his musket to the present. Another coach was passing. Drawn by four bay horses with plumes on their heads, the outriders in livery of blue cloth with velvet facings and gold-frogged buttonholes, it entered the iron gates of the Tuileries which gave upon the court of honour.

Laval was not impressed. He had seen that coach often enough and the man inside it. The high, red face of Cambacérès, the Arch-Chancellor, like a great Dutch cheese standing on a lace-covered dish, was thrown into relief as he passed by the light of the torch held by one of the lackeys on gate duty.

The guardsman brought his musket to the shoulder. There were more coaches to come and there would probably be a member or two of the Imperial family. That would mean turning out the guard. Sergeant Poireau was in a black mood. He had cursed the reliefs on posting them at nine o'clock, for no reason at all except that he hated these high jinks at the Palace. But everyone hated them. Thank God there would be no more of them for a good long time to come. The Emperor was going to Bayonne in a day or two. This, Laval supposed, was his idea of a farewell party. Just to show people what he could do. For if one

has a position to keep up, one must keep up a position.

The sound of hooves was heard again. Laval turned and brought his musket once more to the present as a carriage drawn by two grey horses passed the gates. That was a fine couple inside. The man was tall, with grizzled hair, his face held stiffly above his high stock, and the woman was enormous, enveloped in a vast blue velvet cape. On her head sprouted a jungle of feathers. But her face was brighter than the feathers, red by nature, a female Cambacérès with a rolling eye. The carriage slowed to a walk as it moved past Laval. He stood rigid. Old Marshal Lefebvre, now Duke of Danzig, would notice it if he flickered or blenched. But it was difficult to look sufficiently solemn; for the Duchess, gazing into his stolid face, suddenly caught his eye and closed one of her own in a broad wink. Laval with difficulty suppressed a smile beneath his huge moustache. Nothing would ever work a difference in Madame Sans Gêne. She had followed the French armies since he was a recruit. Had she not been at Valmy? He had actually seen on her petticoat that famous ribbon of hers: 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité ou la Mort.'

The carriage rolled into the court.

Laval now remained at the present, for the coaches were coming thick and fast. His right forearm would remind him soon of the Russian musket ball which had smashed the muscle at Eylau. Already the bearskin was tight upon his forehead, but he would have to stand rigid till his relief.

§ 2

Duroc, Grand Marshal of the Palace, standing in the small drawing-room of the Emperor's suite at the Tuileries, ran his eye down the list of guests. He

stopped at a name with his forefinger and turned to Philip de Ségur, who was waiting beside him.

‘Monsieur de Rougement?’ he queried. ‘Who is Monsieur de Rougement?’

‘A man of substance, I assure you, Marshal,’ replied de Ségur. ‘He lives in a fine house in the Faubourg Saint Antoine and entertains largely. He is very rich. I understand he is here by request of Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress.’

‘Rich, you say?’

‘A friend of Ouvrard, the banker.’

‘Well, I suppose it’s all right. But we’re getting to be so particular these days that nobody really knows. Tell your men to make sure that his card is in order.’

De Ségur bowed in silence. Duroc read to the bottom of the list and put it into a pocket of his embroidered coat.

De Ségur handed him another paper.

‘The orchestra,’ he said. ‘Julien has collected fourteen.’

Duroc glanced at the sheet—three violins, a bass and counter bass, two horns, two oboes and so forth. The Grand Marshal of the Palace scratched his head. He again supposed it was all right, but what the devil was a galoubet? The man Guébaud he remembered. He played the bassoon and played it heartily. There were triangles, too, and kettledrums.

He flashed a look at de Ségur.

‘Kettledrums,’ he said. ‘I see Julien has got those negro players from the Second Grenadiers.’

‘Yes, Marshal,’ answered de Ségur. ‘They are the best in the army.’

‘Good! But put them well out of sight. They attract too much attention. We aim at dignity rather than enthusiasm.’

‘Certainly, Marshal. That has all been arranged. The orchestra is posted on the stage and is well screened by the flowers.’

‘Tell Julien to keep an eye on the Empress,’ said Duroc sharply. ‘She will be making her entry punctually at half-past ten. I am waiting here upon His Majesty.’

De Ségur bowed and withdrew.

Duroc, alone in the room, began to pace up and down. Above the marble mantelpiece was a round, gilt mirror. The walls were hung with green and on the carpet beneath his feet shone the Imperial bees. Did Napoleon remember that he was to meet the Empress in twenty minutes? Probably not. Duroc sighed. How often had he paced this same room, as he was pacing it now, wondering whether to break in on his master untimely or allow an appointment to be missed. He was bound to be scolded either way, especially tonight; for the Emperor was worried.

The Emperor had been worried for several days. The arms of his chair bore the marks of his pocket-knife. That was a sure sign.

Did he resent, perhaps, having to leave the Walewska so soon after she had arrived? Why had he brought her to Paris? Love or policy? Duroc smiled to himself as he stopped pacing and leaned against the mantelshelf. Napoleon had never cared substantially for any woman, except for Josephine, and she had lost him by caring for nobody but herself.

More likely the trouble lay in Spain. Yesterday despatches had come from Aranjuez where King Charles, to protect his minister, Godoy, Prince of the Peace, from the fury of the people, had abdicated in favour of his son, throwing off his crown to protect the man who slept with his queen and made him the laugh-

ing stock of Europe. So now young Ferdinand was prancing about as though he were already King of Spain: prancing to some purpose, from Aranjuez to Madrid, where he had been received with enthusiasm by the town and where he waited for the title stolen from his old father to be recognised. What would the Emperor do? The Spanish people were showing themselves to be oddly attached to their degenerate princes, and Murat, reporting from Madrid, though he had four corps at his command, was uneasy.

Duroc flung up his square head and smiled into the mirror. This was a small cloud and it would pass. What signified the caprice of a foreign mob which had never known the blessings of good government?

There came a tap on the door which further roused him from his meditations.

A page, in a tight, scarlet uniform, stood in the doorway.

‘Her Imperial Majesty instructs me to inform Marshal Duroc that she is waiting for the Emperor.’

Duroc glanced at the gilt clock on the mantelpiece. It was nearly half-past ten.

He crossed the room and half-opened the door which led to the study.

‘These orders for Marshal Berthier . . .’

The Emperor was dictating. Duroc listened for a moment and then turned to the page.

‘His Majesty cannot be interrupted,’ he said. ‘I will speak to the Empress myself.’

§ 3

De Najac, the page, pushed open the door and took his place in front of the Grand Marshal as the regulations prescribed. He thrust out his chest beneath

the scarlet of his uniform. The buttons, he noted, were perilously tight. De Najac was growing fast, but Bastide of the Rue des Petits Austins, the official tailor, had refused to allow for expansion. The breeches, shining with gold braid, caught him in the buttocks and made bowing difficult. But it was a fine uniform, if only it would hold together.

Quickening his pace a little, he tapped on a white gilded door. It was flung wide at once by his two colleagues, Louis Ghilini and Bernard de Rigaud. De Rigaud's hair was all over the place as usual, an unruly mop which was never under control. Ghilini bowed gracefully. But Ghilini was an Italian and too slender to be hampered by his breeches.

The Grand Marshal passed into the room and de Najac, stepping aside, was free to stand for a while at the top of the five broad wooden steps which led down to the ballroom. The floor ran level with the lower of two tiers of boxes which flanked it on either side and it stretched in a glittering plain of polished wood away to a stage at the far end. The orchestra, on the stage, hidden in a thicket of exotic shrubs, mingled with evergreen foliage and tulips embedded in moss, was playing a lively tune, one of the new polkas from Poland. But nobody was dancing yet.

The boxes were packed with women in full toilet. Beneath them bloomed a profusion of flowers, brought that day from Malmaison.

De Najac pitied the women in the boxes. They were very lovely and very beautifully dressed, but they could not take the floor, for they had not yet been presented to Their Majesties.

Overhead thirty chandeliers of cut glass, bearing three tiers of candles, hung from the gilded ceiling and immediately round the ballroom were spread

benches covered with green velvet, heavily embroidered with gold. The room was filled with a clamour of voices which almost drowned the music from the stage.

De Najac assumed the air of polite boredom befitting a page of the Imperial household. But his heart was beating fast, for all the world of Paris was moving at his feet. Senators in their wide coats and white satin breeches, with the little gilded swords which they wore so awkwardly on their hips, alternated with members of the Legislature, scarcely less pompous in their official tricolour sashes. In one corner the Prussian Ambassador in full diplomatic uniform was talking with the Westphalian Chargé d’Affaires, partly obscured by a mixed group of councillors of State and minor ministers. In the centre of the room stood a flurry of marshals and generals in high-braided coats, with their great sabres held awkwardly under the left arm. Marshal Lannes, small and wiry, looking very hot in a tight collar, from which Valenciennes lace burst like water from a pierced pipe, was talking with Augereau. On the outskirts of the group wandered David, the painter, in search of colour or given to his usual occupation of seeking his rival Gérard so that he might have the pleasure of cutting him.

There came an eddy in the crowd. The Empress must be coming. But no, these were the envoys of the Grand Turk, a sight to see in their gilded turbans and white robes. How gravely they moved, though some of them, he noted, wore European dress and looked quite ridiculous.

Above the clamour the cry of a trumpet rang out suddenly. The Empress at last! The crowd, falling silent, divided swiftly to either side of the room. The persons in the boxes rose at the same time to their

feet. The Empress came down the room, followed by her maids of honour and ladies-in-waiting. She was in full court dress and wore the Imperial diadem. The gown, however, was simple: white tulle overlaid with a spotted pattern of the same material caught up with bows of leaf-green satin. Round her throat was a triple necklet of diamonds.

Behind her came the beautiful Maréchale Augereau, wearing a similar gown embroidered with white roses.

The Empress advanced slowly with her famous grace. Feline, said her enemies, but it was the natural grace of one whose ancestors had for generations walked with pitchers on their heads in a single garment of cotton under the warm suns of Martinique. De Najac noted with amusement the efforts of her ladies and of the wives of the marshals and generals to imitate her carriage. They waited on either side of her, forming a living hedge of silks and precious stones, and instinctively, as they fell in behind her, they simulated her easy walk and finished negligence with the fan.

The Empress was now in front of him. Would the breeches stand the strain? De Najac bowed very low indeed, till all he could see was a pointed shoe showing beneath the full satin skirt.

De Najac straightened himself and perceived that the Empress had come to a halt a yard or so away. She had drawn herself to her full height and her dress displayed her charms to full advantage. She was looking to the right, and de Najac, turning in that direction, saw Duroc coming towards her. The Empress raised a beckoning finger. The hush in the room was broken only by a rustle of silk, as the women in the boxes or on the floor tried to get a better view of the encounter, and by the soft notes of the violins playing '*Partons pour la Syrie.*'

'What is this, Duroc?' demanded the Empress. 'Did you not receive my message?'

Duroc bowed a trifle clumsily before her, his left leg standing out ungainly, with the garter straining at the white silk stocking just beneath the satin of his breeches.

'His Imperial Majesty is detained for a moment,' came the low, rather harsh voice of the Grand Marshal.

'Detained? But he was to meet me here and it is already past the hour.'

'The Emperor is dealing with important business. I did not venture to interrupt His Imperial Majesty.'

De Najac saw that a sudden flush dyed the face of the Empress, although it was scarcely perceptible beneath the rouge. Would she make a scene? Josephine de Beauharnais never could remember for long that she was Empress of the French. There was an awkward pause. It seemed to de Najac as though time were standing still. But the world moved on again and such of it as was near enough to see what was happening was cheated of its sensation. The hot anger which had flared a moment in the eyes of the Empress as suddenly died down.

'I will wait for the Emperor in the ante-room,' she said quietly. 'Let the ball be opened. Tell the orchestra to play one of the new waltzes.'

Duroc turned quickly, catching de Najac's eye. De Najac hastened forward.

'Inform Julien,' said Duroc.

De Najac sped away as fast as the dignity of an Imperial page would allow. The crowd on the floor, moving to right and left, made way for him.

Julien, still beating time, looked anxiously over his right shoulder as he saw de Najac coming towards him. With a smooth gesture of his left hand he reduced the

volume of his orchestra as de Najac delivered the message. He then nodded and tapped the desk in front of him with his wand, saying something which de Najac could not catch. There was a momentary flutter of scores as de Najac turned to make his way back. The formal lines of the crowd on the floor broke up and mingled.

This music had a swing to it which was new to the world.

§ 4

The Emperor must not be disturbed. But the Empress was waiting. Duroc thrust gently at the door.

The room into which he looked was large and chequered with shadows. The Emperor's lamp was burning brightly on his desk and there was a pair of triple candlesticks on the mantelpiece. Below them, too, a fire was burning, but it gave little light, for it was shut off from the room by a screen. A gleam from the candles fell on a bronze equestrian statue of Frederick the Great.

In his perpetual corner sat Méneval. Three sounds only broke the silence. The ticking of a pair of clocks at the far end of the study between the two large book-cases, the squeaking of Méneval's flying quill and a metallic voice dictating:

‘ A letter to Murat, Grand Duke of Berg:

‘ I have received your letter, together with those of the King of Spain.’

The Emperor was walking up and down rapidly, his hands twisted in the small of his back.

‘ Get the Prince of the Peace out of the hands of those fellows. My intention is that he should suffer no kind of harm. The

King informs me that he is going to your headquarters. I am awaiting news from you telling me that he is in safety before announcing my intentions. You were quite right not to recognise the Prince of the Asturias. You should conduct King Charles to the Escorial, treat him with great respect and maintain that he is still master in Spain until I have recognised the revolution.

I am setting out for Bayonne.

I am very pleased with your conduct.'

There followed a momentary pause. Duroc ventured to slip into the room. Before he could speak a word, however, the voice began again:

'Now a letter to the King of Naples.'

Napoleon had reached the end of the study and, turning, began to pace again towards Duroc, his head lowered. Duroc ventured a discreet cough, but the Emperor took no notice. He was making towards his desk. Taking up a paper, he held it to the candle-light.

'MY BROTHER,

You will have seen the news from Spain in the *Monitor*. I will tell you as a secret that my troops entered Madrid on the 24th. King Charles protests against all that has been done. He believes his life to be in danger. He has implored my protection. In these circumstances I shall go.'

He was striding backward and forward again. Duroc lost the next few sentences, but caught the thread as Napoleon turned.

'I may start any day for Madrid. This information is for your own use and yours alone.'

The Emperor, within a few feet of Duroc, lifted his head with a sudden jerk.

'Well?' he said impatiently. 'What do you want?'

'The Empress is waiting for Your Majesty,' Duroc answered with a formal bow.

He noticed with relief that the Emperor was dressed

for the réception, wearing his uniform of a colonel of the Guard, blue with white facings.

‘Is it so late?’

‘After half-past ten, sir,’ came the patient voice of the secretary.

Duroc waited for the storm, but Napoleon had apparently worked himself into a better mood. He was standing still, legs apart, arms behind him in the small of the back, head thrust forward at an angle which tightened the jowl forming beneath the aggressive chin. Duroc still waited. Why should he be so moved? He saw the Emperor daily and shared his thoughts. Those who saw him seldom were overwhelmed by his presence. But to one who knew all his poses, all his familiar tricks, he was sometimes no more than a little man difficult to manage.

‘So I am to come to the Empress, Duroc. Is that it? I am to come at once.’

He stepped forward, a smile parting his thin lips. The movement of the blue-clad arm which he thrust out caused the Cross of the Legion on his white waistcoat to clink against the Order of the Iron Crown beside it. Duroc felt a familiar tingling in his right ear.

‘Have it your own way, Duroc. Méneval, at least, will be glad. He must be worn out.’

Napoleon slipped his hand from Duroc’s ear and took his arm. They walked together to the door.

‘That’s a fine suit of clothes you’re wearing, my friend,’ said the Emperor.

Duroc smiled happily at his master.

‘Yes, sir, but not very comfortable.’

‘Not comfortable perhaps, but necessary. Shall I ever get it into your head that you are the Grand Marshal of the Palace? You must learn to carry these trifles with conviction.’

The Emperor flicked at the star on his breast.
'Men are led by toys,' he said.

§ 5

Duroc, gently disengaging his arm, pushed open the door, and stood aside to let the Emperor pass.

'You are late, Bonaparte. It is long past the half-hour.'

Josephine's husky voice broke upon them as they entered the ante-room.

'Taking a leaf out of your book, my dear.'

Napoleon was smiling, and Josephine, prompt to catch his mood, smiled back at him. Round the door leading to the ballroom a cluster of her ladies was waiting. Duroc, as he closed the door behind him and followed Napoleon, saw them all rising like swans from a deep curtsy. One of them, he noted, wobbled badly. That was poor old Madame Lefebvre, more goose than swan. Napoleon, observing her ungainly movement, frowned. But she caught his eye as she straightened up, very red in the face and creaking a little where her stays nipped. Her broad, good-natured face broke into a friendly grin.

Napoleon smiled and patted the plump shoulder as, with the Empress on his arm, he passed through the double doors which de Najac had thrown open.

The clamour in the ballroom ceased suddenly. The orchestra came to a stop in the middle of a bar and, from somewhere unseen, rang out the call of a silver trumpet.

Duroc had seen the sight many times, but he felt the thrill of it again as he walked down the steps a few paces behind his master. The vast room was silent now except for the rustle of silk as every woman present

swept to the floor. The trumpet ceased and now only the swift patter of the pages could be heard as they busily herded the guests to either side. The formal round began. Duroc stood watching.

As always, he was struck by the contrast between the small figure in the rather shabby white-and-blue coat with the two decorations on his breast and the magnificence surrounding him. The Emperor used his prerogative to remain outside the masquerade which he imposed upon them all.

The Emperor took the right and Josephine the left of the room and, as they moved along, the crowd on either side bowed or curtsied. Every now and then the Emperor stopped to say a word to the man or woman in front of him. To most of them he was gracious, but Duroc waited for the harsher note. His master invariably seasoned his courtesies with outbreaks that fluttered, scandalised and immensely gratified his people.

Duroc did not have long to wait. The Countess de Menonville, who never gave or asked for quarter, had just risen from a curtsy. The Emperor looked at her frowningly.

‘White, madam, should be worn only by the very young and even then it rarely becomes them. In you it is inexcusable.’

The Countess flushed warmly beneath her powder as the Emperor passed.

‘Ructions,’ whispered a voice in Duroc’s ear.

Duroc turned and found Lannes at his elbow.

‘Damned awful show,’ exploded Lannes. ‘And God curse the man who invented these clothes.’

Duroc pressed his arm in sympathy. His own velvet coat was heavy enough, but the Emperor was right. Men were led by toys.

Their Majesties had now changed over and the Emperor was moving down the left-hand side of the room. Men and women were all gravity for the Emperor, all smiles and bright eyes for the Empress. Duroc noticed Madame de Luçay, in a dress whose elaborate embroidery rivalled that of the precious carpet from Khorassan which the Grand Turk had sent His Majesty only a few weeks before. Madame Mortier and Madame Augereau beside her affected a costly simplicity. His eye, sweeping down the lines of lovely women, was caught and held by the face of his own wife, Marie, who had just completed her reverence to the Emperor. He felt a quick beating of the heart. The gown made by Leroy suited her well, a transparent muslin, embroidered with gold, and it had cost only fifteen napoleons. Leroy knew better than to overcharge the Grand Marshal of the Palace.

He watched her lovingly. The world held him to be a hard man, too loyal to his master for friendship, too reserved for intimacy. But he knew himself to be of a different metal. He could be moved by music, by small familiar jests and the beauty of women, above all by the beauty of his wife.

He stepped forward, intending, as soon as the Emperor had finished his tour, gradually to reach her so that they might have a word together.

Soon, however, he came to a halt, finding himself a short way from Fouché, who was at that moment making his bow to the Emperor.

‘Monsieur Fouché’—Napoleon’s voice was sharp and clear—‘I leave, as you know, tomorrow. You will, I hope, during my absence, concern yourself very fully with the work of your department.’

‘That is my intention, sir.’

Napoleon looked keenly at the bowed figure in front of him. Fouché, lifting his head, looked quietly back at the Emperor.

'Lately,' continued the Emperor, 'you have found time for business which concerns only myself.'

He tapped Fouché lightly on the arm.

'Police, not politics,' he said, and passed on.

Duroc continued on his way. He sometimes wished his master felt less secure of his ministers. But Napoleon used all men indifferently, false or true. God grant that he might never have to count on the fidelity of his Minister of Police or of his late Minister of External Relations.

Duroc looked instinctively round the room for the limping, unfrocked bishop, Talleyrand. But he was away, of course, on his estate of Valençay and in disgrace. But he would come back. Those two were eternal—Fouché and Talleyrand, a brace of jackals trotting behind the lion.

Duroc, still watching Fouché and carrying his thoughts upon his face, saw the minister pause and bow low to someone on the other side of the room. He wheeled about. The Empress was smiling and, as Duroc turned, she made the slightest gesture with her hand, which was nevertheless a summons. Fouché began to make his way unobtrusively, and as though he had no specific intent, towards her. Duroc shook his head and continued his pilgrimage. He was by now very near to his wife. She would sweeten the air for him again.

What did the Empress want with Fouché? They had been thick as thieves, of course, in the old days, but recently Fouché had become an active protagonist of a royal divorce and it was said that he had a Russian Princess in view for the Tuileries. But here they

were, the Empress and he, with their heads together again.

Duroc, making his way through the crowd, stopped suddenly. A hand had touched his elbow. He swung round and a young man bowed instantly before him. He was in civilian dress and his blue coat and white satin breeches were very new and splendid.

Duroc recognised him at once and his eyebrows lifted slightly.

‘What is it, Marbot?’

‘Countess Walewska has come to the palace. She wishes to see His Majesty.’

The boy spoke so low that Duroc hardly caught the words.

‘Countess Walewska here?’ he echoed.

Felix nodded.

At that moment the violins broke into the first cotillion. Duroc looked distractedly about him. The Emperor and Empress had seated themselves upon gilded chairs raised on a platform half way down the hall.

‘Is it urgent?’ he asked.

‘Madam Walewska insisted that she must see the Emperor tonight.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘Her chair is waiting outside.’

Duroc took a small key from his pocket and gave it to Marbot.

‘You know the drawing-room just off the Emperor’s study?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Take Madame Walewska to that room. I will let the Emperor know that she is here.’

§ 6

Walewska glanced at herself in the gilt mirror above the mantelpiece. Her face beneath the dark brows was a trifle flushed. She found the room heavy and distasteful.

She moved restlessly away from the mirror. It was impossible to remain still and collect her thoughts.

The door opened suddenly, and closed again.

'Marie, what is it? Why have you come?'

Napoleon stood before her.

The arguments she had brought with her were flying. Her heart was beating fast.

'To say goodbye, Marie? I will find time tonight. I will come to you.'

He had taken her hands and his free arm was about her.

'Napoleon,' she said, drawing away from him. 'Is it true that you are leaving for Bayonne tomorrow?'

He nodded quickly.

'I have decided to go at once.'

'Why did you not tell me yesterday?'

'I did not decide till this morning. What is it, Marie? You wish me not to go? It is hard to leave you so soon. But it is necessary.'

'I am unwilling to think it necessary.'

He drew away from her and looked sullen for a moment, then smiled at her indulgently.

'I see what it is. You want to come with me to Bayonne. That can, perhaps, be arranged. But remember that it will be a State visit. We shall have to show the royal families of Europe, Josephine and I, how well we behave.'

She looked at him indignantly.

'You know very well that I am not asking to come with you,' she said.

He took two paces towards her and gripped her arms.

‘Too proud to confess it?’

‘I have no pride. I tore that to pieces long ago.’

‘That is wise. There ought not to be that sort of folly between us.’

Half her weight was supported by the arm he had thrust about her. She felt the muscles in her neck swell and tighten, swept by the emotion which physical contact with him invariably aroused.

‘Listen, Napoleon,’ she said. ‘I have had a letter from my brother. He is with the Grand Duke of Berg.’

‘I should hope so, seeing that I sent him there. What is his trouble? Is he out of favour? Does he claim promotion? Or is it debts? Why is he bothering you?’

She moved impatiently from his embrace and pulled out a paper.

‘Listen to what he says, Napoleon. My brother was in the streets when Ferdinand entered Madrid. This letter will help you to understand.’

‘Is that why you came here, to show me a letter from your brother? Give it to me. I will read it presently.’

‘You cannot read it. It is in Polish. I must read it to you myself.’

She drew away from him and sat down on a settee covered with green silk, tilting the paper to catch the light of the candles.

‘The enthusiasm,’ she read slowly, translating as she went, ‘was indescribable. These Spaniards, I grant you, are a southern race; but honestly, Marie, I have never seen anything like it. Even our own welcome to the Emperor when he first rode into Warsaw was nothing to it.’

‘Indeed,’ interjected Napoleon dryly.

‘Nothing,’ she repeated.

‘They wept. They threw flowers. The men ripped off their coats and threw them down in front of him. Everyone was shouting Ferdinand. . . . Long live King Ferdinand.’

‘And what of Ferdinand?’ demanded Napoleon abruptly.

‘He sat like a man amazed,’ continued Marie, turning a page, ‘with his underlip thrust out.’

‘That is nature,’ said Napoleon. ‘He cannot help it.’

She folded the letter and pushed it back into her dress. Napoleon looked at her mockingly.

‘Thank you, Marie,’ he said. ‘Your brother writes a good letter; a little flamboyant, perhaps, but he is young.’

‘He writes of what he has seen and it confirms all I have heard or read of the Spanish people. This is the first result of your policy. Ferdinand has become a national hero.’

‘I am well informed concerning Ferdinand. He is dull and stupid. He has neither brains nor dignity.’

‘Then it means all the more that the people should receive him like a king. They are ready to accept as a leader anyone who will deliver them from foreign rule.’

‘My dear, you are talking nonsense. Have you any idea what these Spaniards are like? I will tell you. They live entirely in the past. They are a priest-ridden, unhappy people. They take no account of time. They live today as though the Prince of Parma’s pikemen were still the terror of Europe. They know nothing of army organisation and their generals are a laughing-stock. A corporal and two files of grenadiers

will be enough to send them packing. I have four corps in Spain, not to mention Junot in Portugal.'

'I am not thinking of the Spanish armies, but of the Spanish people. You tell me they are ridden by priests. But that only makes them the more dangerous. They will believe that they are defending not only their country but their faith.'

Napoleon nodded rapidly.

'It is impossible to fight a nation. Civilians must be kept neutral. I allow no plunder and no outrage upon non-combatants. A mob in the streets or a nest of bandits in difficult country is more to be feared than the finest army in the world. But all this is beside the point. I shall not enter Spain as an invader. I shall respect the nation and its faith. I shall offer the Spanish people an opportunity to take its place in the comity of nations. Spain must enter the European system. What people in their sane senses would choose to continue under the Bourbons and their priests when I bring them the benefits of liberty and progress?'

'It is strange liberty you offer them, Napoleon. Do you really believe that you can compel a nation to be free?'

'Today they shout for Ferdinand. Tomorrow they will shout for me or for someone else. Say that I want to free them in spite of themselves. I merely hasten the event. I wish to give them now what a hundred years hence they will take with their own hands. I am a better Spaniard than the man who rips off his coat for Ferdinand.'

He had begun to stride up and down the small room. His voice rose, strident and tuneless, yet charged with feeling.

'I am pledged to a new order and I will see that it is established. You talk to me of peace and the rights

of nations. I do not fight with nations. My war is with the English subsidies. I am fighting the moneylenders who create false values. They will ruin all nations alike.'

He came down the room towards her. She could not tell how much of what he said was sincere or how much of it was self-persuasion. She had often seen him like this, convincing himself that he worked, not for victory, but for some great end of which he was the missionary. Only one thing was clear. He was set stubbornly upon his purpose.

He lifted his head as he reached her and, changing his tone, shouted in a sudden exasperation:

'You always accuse me, Marie. Always these politics. Am I never to escape?'

He stepped towards her, but at that moment she heard a movement and saw that Napoleon was looking over her shoulder.

She turned. The door of the room had been flung wide open and there came a flash of scarlet as an Imperial page bowed low, his figure instantly obscured by an eruption of white tulle and leaf-green satin.

The Empress moved towards her.

Immediately behind came a woman of shorter and heavier build, in whom Marie instantly recognised Caroline Murat. Cromwell's head upon a pretty woman—where had she heard that saying? But the woman was not really pretty. The famous pink-and-white complexion and the striking profile, carried from habit so that men might see it from the better side, were marred by a bad mouth set in a perpetual sneer, while her carriage, which aimed at majesty, looked ungainly beside the easy movements of the Empress.

The door behind these splendid figures shut with a dry click.

Marie swept to the ground in a deep curtsy. Before she could rise, however, she felt her hands gripped. Josephine was pulling her to her feet.

'We are not in the throne-room, child. Do you curtsy to the Emperor?'

Marie, upright again, mastered her surprise. She suddenly felt cool and wary. She had often imagined herself meeting the Empress. This was the reality.

'I came in good time, Bonaparte,' continued Josephine, still smiling. 'I could not help overhearing. You were talking politics.'

She turned to Marie.

'That is a mistake, my dear. Bonaparte dislikes discussing politics with women.'

'Josephine!'

The Emperor's voice was quiet but challenging. He had shown no sign of surprise or embarrassment at the entry of his wife and sister.

'What are you doing here?' he continued. 'Why have you left the ballroom?'

'This is my fault,' broke in Caroline.

'She has the same voice as her brother,' thought Marie, 'but in a woman it is unpleasant.'

'I hear there is a courier in from Madrid,' continued Caroline. 'What is the news of Joachim?'

Marie had stepped back and was leaning against the mantelpiece. She felt very much alone. The eyes of Josephine were raking her.

'Your husband is well, Anunziata,' said the Emperor.

'Joachim is always well,' said Josephine softly. 'I don't think Caroline has any anxiety about his health.'

'Joachim is well,' repeated Napoleon, 'and I am pleased with him.'

There was a moment's silence.

'He has carried out my instructions in Madrid very well, in so far as he understands them,' continued the Emperor.

A thin smile appeared and vanished on the olive face. Marie looked from brother to sister and back again to the Empress.

'Politics again,' said Josephine, shaking her head. 'I am sure this is not the time.'

'But you have told me nothing!'

It was again the voice of Caroline, and, at the commanding tone of it, a shrill parody of her brother's accent, Marie turned her head.

'Can you say no more than that? You are pleased with him. That is very gratifying.'

Marie saw that Caroline was making a strong effort to control her rising temper. The complexion, white faintly tinted with rose, was flushed and mottled.

Napoleon smiled swiftly and, stretching out a hand, pulled Caroline to him by the ear, as though she were one of his generals.

'Joachim is a loyal subject. He will be delighted to know that I appreciate his services.'

Caroline caught her brother's arm and freed herself impatiently.

'Is that all the answer you will give, Napoleon?'

The Emperor looked at his sister. He was apparently quite unruffled.

'I have already said all I have to say, Anunziata,' he answered. 'Your husband is in Madrid as my lieutenant. And there, for the present, he will stay.'

'It is not enough,' said Caroline harshly—the heavy white shoulders were shaking. 'What are your plans for Joachim? You will never say what is in your mind. I am your sister, but you treat me as

though I were a banker's daughter.'

The lips were drawn back in a snarl, showing uneven teeth.

'The Grand Duchess of Berg wishes to know your mind, Bonaparte.'

The voice of Josephine, with its light emphasis on the title, was oil to the flame.

'You hear that, Napoleon?' shouted Caroline. 'The Empress puts your sister in her place. You found a better title for her brat. But it was always so. The men who do the work are treated worse than dirt. Joachim, if he had his rights, would be King of Spain. Who else among your leaders rides in battle twenty-five paces ahead of ten thousand horsemen with nothing in his hand but a riding-switch?'

Napoleon looked angrily at his sister.

'Joachim is a cavalry leader. Why do you remind me that he frequently behaves like a circus master? I am tired of your speech about the riding-switch. Please do not make it again.'

Josephine watched the scene with an affected indulgence.

'My poor Caroline,' she murmured. 'I told you this would happen.'

Caroline turned upon the Empress.

'This is no business of yours,' she snapped. 'I shall speak to my brother how and when I choose.'

'Silence, both of you!'

Napoleon's voice rose abruptly. Caroline stood trembling in the centre of the room. There were angry tears in her eyes.

'Josephine,' he continued sharply, 'take my sister back to the ballroom at once.'

He turned upon Marie, so that she shrank still further against the mantelpiece.

‘ You too, Marie. I refuse to discuss these matters any further. You will accompany the Empress to the ballroom.’

Marie glanced involuntarily at Josephine. The Empress was smiling.

‘ That will be charming,’ she said.

‘ In those clothes?’ protested Caroline.

She had taken hold of herself with an effort and was now apparently calm.

‘ The Grand Duchess is right,’ Marie urged. ‘ I am not dressed for the ballroom.’

Napoleon moved forward quickly and looked her up and down.

‘ Nonsense, Marie. You will do very well. Simplicity is in the fashion. All you need is something to set it off.

‘ Méneval,’ he called.

There came a sound of footsteps from the study. The Emperor moved to the door and spoke through it to his secretary. Marie could not catch what he said, but she heard the low reply.

‘ Yes, sir, immediately.’

The footsteps of the secretary died away. Napoleon stood waiting by the brightly painted door. The silence was broken at last by Josephine.

‘ Will you not be coming back yourself?’ she asked.

He shook his head decisively.

‘ I have work to do.’

A hand in a dark sleeve came through the half-open door. The Emperor took from Méneval a small leather case. He opened it and strode forward. The case fell on the carpet behind him. The diamonds in his hands glittered in the candle-light.

‘ Help her to fasten them, Caroline.’

Marie drew back.

‘Quick,’ said Napoleon imperiously. ‘It is an order.’

The long candles wavered on the mantelpiece. There were hands at her throat. Something pierced the skin of her neck.

‘There are your jewels,’ whispered a voice in her ear, ‘and may they choke you, little harlot.’

The Emperor moved impetuously to the door by which Josephine had entered and pulled it open. A gust of music swept into the room. Marie looked through the door. Two figures in scarlet appeared and bowed low before her.

Marie helplessly followed the Empress. Caroline was walking beside her. The ugly flush in her cheeks and forehead had drained away and left them blanched and perfect as before.

Marie saw these things vaguely. Beyond the two women she became aware of a thousand faces, flushed or pale, moving like lanterns over a wide floor.

§ 7

‘I shall retire at once,’ said the Empress. ‘But let the ball continue.’

Josephine was speaking to a dark man in the splendid uniform of the Grand Marshal of the Palace. Marie realised that this was her friend, Duroc.

The Empress turned to her graciously and beckoned her forward.

‘Duroc,’ she said. ‘You already know Countess Walewska. She is here by His Majesty’s order. Will you please see that she is suitably provided and amused.’

Duroc bowed low to the Empress and then, less formally, to Marie. The orchestra, which had stopped

playing on the appearance of the Empress, broke into a waltz. Marie saw that Duroc was waving her to follow the Imperial group, with the other maids of honour, as it began to move slowly to the left between the bowing throng.

But Marie could not move. The diamonds seemed to burn her throat.

Duroc came back to her quickly.

'Stay where you are, madam. I will return as soon as the Empress releases me.'

How long she waited she did not know. But presently the music ceased and the room was filled with clamour. Gorgeous men in velvet, with sprouting lace, passed in front of her. It was unbearably hot and the air was heavy with the smell of cosmetics. She shut her eyes a moment; then opened them again. Her gaze steadied and at last she saw the scene clearly.

The dancers were being ranged in rows round the ballroom. A little man, with mincing steps, was walking rapidly up and down. But his thin voice could not easily be heard. Suddenly he clapped his hands. The orchestra behind the moss and tulips at the far end of the stage burst into a lively air. A rout of dancers, alternating ranks of men and women, burst into the room and spread across the glassy floor. Applause broke out, desultory first and then more general.

'Monsieur de Mackau is in form tonight.'

Marie turned her head at the sound of the voice. Was it one of the pages who had spoken?

There came a gust of laughter from the far end of the room.

Monsieur de Mackau had opened the door leading to the corridor and away to the series of reception rooms of the palace. The long chain followed him, laughing

and shouting. Some of the unattached dancers fell in behind.

Another door opened, this time from the Salon de Mars, and Monsieur de Mackau reappeared, footing it lightly with, behind him, the rout still following in the *ronde de chat*.

A lackey, passing at that moment with a silver tray, tripped over the foot of one of the dancers. He staggered and the slim glasses filled with yellow, bubbling wine crashed sideways to the floor. A shriek of laughter welcomed this diversion.

A large woman with a red face, on which the beads of sweat ran freely, pushed resolutely past Marie.

She was speaking loudly to a big man in the full dress of a Marshal of France.

‘François,’ she said, ‘come here.’

The big man was swaying on his feet. He held a half glass of champagne in his hand. He turned large eyes upon the woman with the red face. The wine was dripping from his grizzled moustache.

Marie watched the scene, incredulous.

‘Good old Madame Sans Gêne,’ said the voice she had heard before.

The woman with the red face was addressing the company at large.

‘I am going home,’ she announced.

Whereupon, with determination, she pushed the big man inexorably towards the door.

Marie suddenly felt faint. The noise, the lights, the smell of the room were unbearable. Where was Duroc?

She felt a timid pressure on her arm.

‘Madam,’ said someone at her elbow.

Marie turned gladly at the familiar voice. It was Monsieur Felix. His face was flushed and his eyes were bright.

‘ You have been dancing, Monsieur Felix? ’

His eyes were upon the diamonds at her throat. She put up her hand as though to tear them away.

‘ Take me back, ’ she whispered, and grasped the arm he offered.

§ 8

Some hours later Marie woke in her bed. Somewhere drums were beating. But the beating changed to a sharp clatter. She sat up and listened, still on the edge of sleep.

The silk bed with the high muslin canopy was like a ship. The noise increased.

She slipped from the bed and, walking to the window, pulled aside the heavy curtain.

Outside it was broad daylight and in the street below an endless stream of carriages was passing. The noise she had heard was of horses and wheels and the voices of men who rode beside them in green-and-white uniforms.

‘ Madam, ’ said a voice at her side.

She turned.

It was Marysia.

‘ What is it? ’ she asked.

‘ It is the Emperor, madam, starting for Bayonne. ’

CHAPTER VI

§ 1

GENERAL SAVARY, come to Madrid on business of State, crossed the Calle de Bailen. It was the seventh day of April. The spring, not yet of age, was fully blown. In this southern land small time was lost between bud and blooming.

The Emperor had instructed him to ascertain whether the abdication of King Charles was to be read as a valid act. The Emperor also wished to be informed as to the disposition of Ferdinand, Prince of the Asturias, towards France and her Imperial master.

Such was his mission, as official history, possibly with his assistance, would present it. But the Emperor had not sent for his faithful servant and wasted the night hours with a view to learning, in due course, things he already knew better than any man in Europe. The Emperor had felt the need of a man who could read what was in his mind and execute instructions conveyed in flashes of talk that hinted a purpose only half declared.

‘You understand?’ the Emperor had concluded upon a slow Italian smile; and Savary, not for the first time, had understood. The royal fox must be bolted from his Spanish earth. Napoleon, when his right hand wished not to know what his left was doing, sent

for Savary, as he had sent for him on a day four years ago, when the Duke d'Enghien was to be hurried to his death in the wet ditch at Vincennes and the First Consul had not wished to be troubled with appeals. For a moment the Spanish sunshine faded and the white face of d'Enghien, growing fainter with the years, flared suddenly and was extinguished. Savary sighed. He would carry that stain to his grave and beyond it, but it was a stain upon the left hand of the master and that must be his reward.

Savary had ridden south from Saint Cloud, the spring coming to meet him as he rode, cursing the saddle, for the riding gave him soreness and much pain, but with the joy of a faithful servant from whom no secrets were hid.

A chamberlain of the palace was crossing the court of honour to meet him, and Savary, after greetings had been exchanged, followed his conductor towards a wide gateway where troopers lounged, spitting into the dust. Passing the gate they turned right and climbed the marble steps of a great staircase. On each landing, as they passed, the pikemen on duty crashed their weapons to the floor in salute. At the top of the staircase he was taken through a series of ante-rooms, policed by the royal bodyguard in crimson-and-silver uniforms. In the third room, sombre with hangings of crimson velvet, numbers of people, of whom none was known to him, were waiting for audience. At the far corner of the room one of the guard opened a door and stood aside.

Savary, settling his stock more comfortably about his throat, passed through the door and found himself in yet another ante-chamber. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with lustrous green tiles, twisted into fantastic designs of cherubs, fruit and flowers.

Savary had no time, however, to note his surroundings, for the door had barely closed behind him when a tall figure advanced, extending a pair of thin, white hands.

‘General Savary, allow me to introduce myself.’

Savary bowed.

‘If I am not mistaken, it is the Canon Juan Escoiquiz,’ he said.

The Canon nodded gravely. He was lean and uncommonly tall, dressed with care in a long soutane, on which gleamed the cross of Carlos III.

He motioned Savary to a chair and Savary saw that they were alone.

‘You shall see His Majesty in a moment, General,’ he said. ‘I need hardly say that he is most anxious to receive you. Never was so young a sovereign faced with such difficulties of every kind.’

‘My dear Canon,’ Savary answered, sitting back in his chair, ‘His Royal Highness has, of course, assumed very considerable responsibilities.’

‘His responsibilities, General, were not assumed. His Majesty’—he stressed the title—‘had no choice in the matter. The decision was forced upon him by his people and by the considered act of his royal father, the ex-King Charles.’

Savary nodded gravely.

‘I am glad to receive that assurance,’ he said. ‘To be frank with you, Canon, the Emperor has received disquieting information of the recent events at Aranjuez which resulted in the premature succession of Prince Ferdinand to the throne.’

Savary, leaning back in his chair, apparently unwary, noted the mortification, instantly controlled, of the Canon.

‘It is given out,’ he continued smoothly, ‘that His

Majesty abdicated in due and proper form from motives of patriotism and out of respect for the will of his people. But there are other readings of the situation. It is even contended that the abdication of King Charles is invalid on the ground that he acted under compulsion.'

Escoiquiz made an eloquent gesture with his thin hands. He rose from his chair and began pacing the room in a flutter of skirts.

'I wish you had been present at Aranjuez,' he said warmly. 'The young King was called to the throne by his people. It was a revolution.'

'I am from Paris, my dear Canon, where we know something of revolutions. If I were inclined to be cynical I should say that your young pupil managed this one very well.'

Escoiquiz came to a halt and faced about. For a moment he seemed on the point of losing his temper. But suddenly he smiled and a look of understanding, almost of complicity, passed between the two men.

Escoiquiz, resuming his seat, leaned forward confidentially.

'If it is the object of your mission, General Savary, to ascertain that the abdication of the ex-King Charles was a deliberate act of State, I have no doubt whatever that you will be satisfied. It only remains for me to assure you that this event will in no way prejudice the interests of France.'

'There again you anticipate me,' responded Savary, 'and I shall be happy to receive from His Royal Highness a confirmation of what you say. It is feared in Paris that your revolution, though it may not have been directed against France and the friendly policy of King Charles and his Ministers, may have the result of disturbing present relations between the two countries.'

'Is that the feeling of the Emperor?' demanded Escoiquiz.

He looked hard at Savary as he spoke, and Savary gave him look for look, till Escoiquiz, out of countenance, dropped his eyes.

'The Emperor,' continued Savary, 'has always regarded himself as a firm ally of King Charles. He has every reason to fear the consequences of a revolution directed against his friend.'

'If we must be personal, General Savary, let me assure you that the revolution was directed against one man only. I am referring, as you know, to Godoy, Prince of the Peace.'

'The Emperor has no knowledge of Emmanuel Godoy, except that his name stands at the foot of a treaty signed with France.'

'We shall prove to you that Godoy had no intention whatever of fulfilling his engagements.'

There was a short silence.

'Meanwhile,' continued Escoiquiz, as he rose from his chair, 'I trust that, in the discharge of your mission, you will accept the position as it stands. My master is young and impressionable. He will expect to be approached in a manner appropriate to his station.'

Savary smiled slowly.

'In other words, you wish me to address him as Majesty. I see no harm in that. You have my credentials and they make it clear that my mission is unofficial. The expressions I may see fit to use are not in any way binding, so that how I choose to name the Prince of the Asturias is of no consequence.'

He stopped abruptly and rose to his feet as the door at the further end of the room opened and a young man entered.

His manner of approach was reluctant, as though

he were coming to receive a lesson. The heavy face was sullen as of a man not sure of his welcome and prepared to resent in advance the snub which he expected to receive. A large nose drooped to a mouth from which the bottom lip was thrust out and the mouth was underhung by a heavy chin. His eyes were dark, below jet-black eyebrows glossy as leeches.

Escoiquiz went to meet the newcomer.

'Allow me, Your Majesty, to present General Savary.'

Ferdinand, Prince of the Asturias, stood silent a moment.

'I am very glad to see you, General,' he said at last, and with an abrupt, loutish gesture thrust out his hand, palm downwards.

Savary bowed, but did not notice the hand.

'I have come on a delicate mission, Your Royal Highness,' he said.

Ferdinand started back. He glanced towards Escoiquiz as though he intended to speak, but the Canon gave him no encouragement.

Savary smiled inwardly. To his right Escoiquiz, a lean figure silhouetted against the velvet hangings of the window, darted at him a look almost of appeal.

'It is an entirely unofficial mission,' continued Savary smoothly, 'and it is on that footing that I would request you, sir, to receive me.'

'Certainly,' stammered Ferdinand. 'Of course. But what have you come to tell me, unofficially? What is it, Escoiquiz? What news does the General bring to us from Paris?'

'I have to inform you, sir,' said Savary, 'that the Emperor is on his way to the Spanish frontier. He takes an extremely serious view of the situation.'

'It will be our privilege, General,' the smooth voice of Escoiquiz instantly picked up the cue, 'to convince the Emperor that the situation is quite normal. His Majesty'—here he turned his head swiftly in the direction of Ferdinand—'has been officially acknowledged as reigning King by the diplomatic corps. He made his State entry into Madrid a few days ago, when he was welcomed by the entire people. At this moment only one person in Spain has not seen fit to recognise him. I am referring to the French Commander-in-Chief, the Grand Duke of Berg, who, when His Majesty entered Madrid, thought fit to be reviewing his troops elsewhere. But he must know better than anyone the true feelings of the Spanish people.'

'I would venture to remind His Royal Highness,' said Savary bluntly, 'that the Grand Duke of Berg is in close contact with the Emperor, whose lieutenant he is and to whom he sends daily reports on the situation. I would further remind him that his royal parents have had time to communicate with Paris, and I am given to understand that their pens have not been idle, more especially that of the Queen.'

'The ex-Queen,' muttered Ferdinand. 'She has no credit here.'

Savary affected not to notice the interruption.

'She acts, I am told, as amanuensis for her royal husband. His rheumatism, I hear, is still very bad.'

'Need we discuss my father's rheumatism?' demanded Ferdinand sharply.

Savary ventured to smile.

'I mention it only in order to assure you that not even a physical infirmity prevents your royal father from approaching the Emperor.'

Ferdinand turned suddenly and faced Escoiquiz. His heavy face was clouded and the under lip was wet.

'They are all in it, Escoiquiz,' he stammered. 'I will have no more of it. I am master here by the will of the people. Spain has had enough of the ex-Queen and her lover.'

Escoiquiz laid a hand on the young man's shoulder.

'Quite so, Your Majesty,' he said, in the tone which he had doubtless used for years when his royal pupil was difficult. 'But if I understand rightly what General Savary is trying to convey, the point is that the Emperor is taking, or may take, a wholly distorted view of the situation owing to the fact that at present his information comes exclusively from sources which are hostile to Your Majesty. That, I take it, is the suggestion, is it not, General?'

Savary bowed. The Canon, he was pleased to note, understood him perfectly.

'That being so,' continued Escoiquiz, 'we must, I think, admit that the Emperor has shown proof of his goodwill in sending General Savary to visit you unofficially with a view, presumably, to ascertaining the facts.'

Ferdinand again seemed about to speak, but checked himself.

'His Honour,' said Savary, 'describes the situation admirably. The Emperor wishes, at all costs, to be fair. So far, he has seen only one side of the picture.'

There was a short silence. Ferdinand took three or four steps down the wide room. Savary waited. The fish was hooked and had only to be played.

'What do you want me to do?' demanded Ferdinand.

He had swung round and was standing with head lowered, like an angry Spanish bull.

Savary looked absently at the ceiling where the flamboyant gods and goddesses of Tiepolo looked

down on them in a fine benevolent disorder.

'The Emperor,' he said, 'is coming to the frontiers of Spain. He will, in a day or two, reach the Château of Marrac, near Bayonne. King Charles is notoriously anxious to meet him there.'

'My father means to get at him,' said Ferdinand. 'Is that what you are trying to say? But the old man is not going to have things all his own way. By God, he is not.'

He swung round upon Savary.

'Will you take me to the Emperor, General?'

Savary seemed to be weighing the matter.

'If you really feel, sir, that it would be the best course,' he said at last.

'The matter must certainly be considered,' put in Escoiquiz from the window.

'Considered?' stammered Ferdinand, his face flushing. 'I am not a child, Escoiquiz. Tell me, General, is the Emperor inclined to meet me? Am I invited?'

'I can only repeat what I have already said, sir,' replied Savary. 'There are two sides to every question and my master would naturally wish to hear them both.'

'Your Majesty,' began Escoiquiz.

Ferdinand turned on him suddenly.

'My mind is made up,' he said. 'We start for Burgos this afternoon. See to it, Escoiquiz.'

Whereupon Prince Ferdinand of the Asturias, swinging on his heel, went from the room abruptly.

§ 2

'His Majesty is beginning to feel tired after so long a journey. He therefore instructs me to say that he will be unable to meet you tonight at supper.'

Don Pedro Ceballos bowed.

'I am sorry,' said Savary smoothly, 'that His Royal Highness should be feeling indisposed.'

A courteous disbelief was implicit in his manner.

'And the Canon?' Savary enquired politely.

'Sick,' said the Minister curtly.

'All my sympathy,' murmured Savary.

The face of the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs was quite impassive.

It was the evening of the fourth day and they were now at Vittoria. At Buitrago, at Aranda del Duero and again at Burgos, Savary had dined with Ferdinand. But with each mile that brought them further north, the Prince's disposition had changed. Savary was outwardly careful to notice nothing, maintaining an air of polite indifference as the young man grew increasingly sullen. Ferdinand had got rather drunk at Burgos and after supper, during which he had answered all Savary's attempts at conversation in monosyllables or not at all, he had sent for a girl to be brought in from the streets. At Burgos, too, he had met Señor de Valdes and Señor de la Cuesta, who had made no secret of their feelings. Why was His Majesty moving northwards in such unseemly haste? Why was he travelling without proper escort and no preparations made for his comfort? These gentlemen had even hinted at a trap and had been heard to observe, in whispers intended to carry, that the Emperor Napoleon had already kings enough in his retinue.

Savary had seen clearly how the wind was setting, but he had pretended to notice nothing and, with maddening iteration, had harped on the interest of his Imperial master in Emmanuel Godoy, still, he was sorry to note, a prisoner and in peril of his life. He had spoken much of the Prince of the Peace and of his

claims to esteem as the signatory of a treaty of alliance with France. Ferdinand had listened in silence, picking his Bourbon nose from time to time, and, when Savary had finished, he had shrugged his heavy shoulders and muttered:

‘I am to let the fellow go. Is that what you mean?’

Savary had seen no more of him during the long dusty ride from Burgos to Vittoria, and it was now six in the evening, the sun well towards his decline. A shaft of sunlight, sprinkled with dust, shone on the shabby splendour of the room in which he was standing. The Prince’s quarters were on the first floor of the Mayor’s house. It gave on to the square outside, which was fuller than usual. Peasants in leather breeches were predominant; rough men, their faces and necks brick-red, though it was not yet the middle of April. The air was full of sound: the lowing of oxen far away and, nearer, the staccato barking of dogs and the whickering of pigeons’ wings that wheeled and fluttered about the houses.

‘His Majesty instructed me to give you this,’ continued Ceballos, flicking back the lace at his wrists.

Savary noted that the Minister had found time to change his coat and that he was wearing a very splendid affair of flame-coloured velvet. Evidently Ferdinand was not too ill to ask his Foreign Minister to supper.

Savary took the paper and glanced at it. It was an order instructing the Infante Don Antonio, uncle to Ferdinand, appointed Regent during his absence from Madrid, to deliver up Godoy, formerly Prince of the Peace, to the custody of his Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of the French, on the understanding that there would be no interference with the ordinary processes of law.

Savary smiled at the concluding phrase. By the

'ordinary processes of law' was signified the forcible seizure by Ferdinand of the property of his distinguished prisoner.

He looked up from the paper.

'It is not countersigned, your Excellency,' he pointed out.

'That is quite unnecessary,' said Ceballos shortly.

'Surely, as Minister for Foreign Affairs . . .'

Savary paused and waited while the Spaniard, taking the paper from his hand, walked across the room to a writing-desk which bore on its lid the inlaid figure of a man carrying a drawn sword and riding a horse. He pulled it open and there came the squeak of a quill. Then he turned back and thrust the paper into Savary's hands.

Savary bowed as he folded it.

'This shall be despatched immediately, your Excellency,' he said. 'I am glad that His Royal Highness shows such consideration for the wishes of my master.'

He walked towards the door. As he pushed it open he turned.

'Present my respects to His Royal Highness,' he said. 'I trust that the dinner will be adequate.'

He shut the door softly behind him and, on the staircase, looked at his watch. It was just six o'clock. If he were not to dine with the Prince, he would dine with General Verdier, Commandant of the French garrison.

With the order for Godoy's release in his pocket, Savary made his way alone and on foot through the crowded streets. The people of Vittoria were well astir. There was excitement in the air. Groups of men belonging to all classes, but mostly farmers or small tradesmen in dark green or snuff-coloured clothes,

stood about at every corner deep in conversation. They took little notice of Savary, who had been careful not to wear French uniform.

‘Now that we have a king, let him stay with us for the love of the saints. That Prince of the Peace, the *choricero*, they will string him up, please God.’

These and similar expressions met Savary’s ears as he made his way to the citadel.

It was pleasant to be recognised by the sentry at the gate, an old soldier with a grizzled moustache who smiled in saluting, and, as Savary crossed the wide parade ground, French trumpets, sounding the retreat, rang out.

Five minutes later, from the window of the mess-room, Savary watched one of General Verdier’s aide-camps ride at full gallop through the gateway southwards to Madrid and to Murat with Godoy’s act of liberation in his pocket.

The mess was pleasant. It was good to hear French again, and the officers were eager with questions. General Verdier even felt it necessary to reprove some of the younger subalterns for their curiosity. Savary refused to stay long and left them as the wine was beginning to go round a second time. The lights of the candles shone on young faces with silky moustaches and, here and there, on the rugged face of a senior major with greying whiskers.

‘You may see me again,’ said Savary to Verdier as he said goodbye. ‘There may be work for us here.’

‘At your service, General,’ answered Verdier quietly.

Savary, refusing the escort of a lackey, returned to the Mayor’s house, still on foot. He climbed the shadowy stairs and paused a moment before pushing open the second door on the right of the long passage.

He had heard a murmur of voices.

Canon Escoiquiz was not, it seemed, too sick to receive his friends. Savary knocked perfunctorily, and, entering without waiting to be asked, found himself in a low wide room. A four-poster bed was its main piece of furniture. The hangings of the bed were half drawn and the room itself was in deep shadow, for the only light came from a cluster of four candles standing in a pewter candlestick on a little table. The Canon was extended on the bed, a cotton nightcap on his head, his throat swaddled in bright scarves. Beside the candles on the table stood a silver cup from which a thin steam rose and the room smelled heavily of cinnamon. A chair scraped as Savary entered. The swarthy form of Ceballos had risen from a low seat beside the bed.

‘I hope I do not intrude,’ said Savary smoothly. ‘I came to enquire after your health, my dear Canon. It is indeed unfortunate that you should have caught cold, on such a warm day, too.’

‘It is kind of you, General,’ replied Escoiquiz. ‘Believe me, it is nothing. I have these fits.’

‘At what time do we start tomorrow?’ asked Savary, drawing up a chair and seating himself a short distance from Ceballos.

‘We shall start at ten,’ said the Minister.

He spoke sharply, looking towards the Canon propped on his pillows.

‘That is rather late, is it not?’ ventured Savary.

‘At ten,’ repeated Ceballos, ‘and tomorrow evening we shall sleep at Burgos.’

Savary raised his eyebrows.

‘Burgos,’ he echoed. ‘I do not understand?’

‘His Majesty has decided to return to Madrid,’ said Ceballos bluntly.

Savary turned a little towards the Minister and braced himself.

'May I ask,' he demanded quietly, 'the reason for this sudden change in our plans?'

'His Majesty's decision surely needs no explanation. It is impossible for him to see the Emperor in this scrambling fashion. Nothing has been decided, not even the etiquette of the meeting.'

Savary smiled.

'If that is the only difficulty,' he said, 'it is not insurmountable. There is a bridge over the Bidassoa. If His Royal Highness feels it to be incorrect to cross the river into the territory of a friend and neighbour—well, the bridge can always be measured, my dear Minister.'

'Measured?' echoed Ceballos blankly.

'So as to determine its central point. There are precedents. When the Emperor met the Czar at Tilsit the encounter took place, you remember, on a raft moored in midstream. When he meets the Prince of the Asturias, perhaps a bridge might serve as well.'

There was a moment's silence. Ceballos seemed to be finding it difficult to control his anger. Savary leaned back, watching both men.

Canon Escoiquiz raised himself from the bed on his left elbow.

'There is a real reason for the change in His Majesty's plans. We have little evidence as to the attitude of the Emperor. Such as we have is not reassuring. I would allude, for example, to the conduct of the Grand Duke of Berg, who has not yet recognised His Majesty's succession. I would even venture to refer to your own very pronounced reserve in this particular.'

Savary looked at the Canon with a pained expression.

‘For myself,’ he said, ‘I am only a messenger. I have no authority to commit the Emperor on a matter of policy. I can only say that the Emperor’s reserve is very natural and very necessary. He is asked to accept a position of fact. But he must be satisfied, in fairness to his old friend and ally King Charles, that the position is regular, lawful and in accordance with precedent.’

Ceballos made an impatient movement.

‘All this, if I may say so, General, is beside the point. It is for the Spanish nation to decide between King Ferdinand and the ex-King Charles. His Majesty has no business to transact with the Emperor. Why, then, should he go to meet him?’

Savary set his mouth in a firm line.

‘My master,’ he said, ‘has business, and very important business, to transact with the ruler of this country, whoever he may be.’

‘Is the King of Spain to accept the judgment of a foreign prince?’

‘I should prefer to say that the foreign prince, in this case the Emperor Napoleon, has an undoubted right to decide with whom he will negotiate in matters affecting the peace of Europe.’

‘The attitude of my master is quite definite,’ answered Ceballos. ‘He is an independent monarch who has lately ascended the most venerable throne in the world. He is willing, and indeed anxious, to become a firm friend of France, but he will never allow his country to be dependent upon any foreign Power.’

He paused. The lean hand of Escoiquiz moved slowly from the bed and raised the silver cup to his lips.

‘The relations of our two countries,’ continued Ceballos, warming to his subject, ‘during the last ten

years have been by no means reassuring. Under the late King our policy was practically dictated from the Tuileries. Who is responsible for the breach with England? Who was responsible for the loss of our fleet at Trafalgar? Who is responsible for the fact that fifteen thousand of our best troops are at present in the Netherlands?'

Ceballos thrust forward his swarthy face. His eyes were bright and his hands shaking with excitement.

Savary looked at him for a moment and then rose slowly to his feet.

'I gather that as Foreign Minister of Spain you have somewhat decided opinions concerning my master's policy. I further conclude that I can be of no further service in the business between us and that I am, in effect, dismissed.'

'Come, my dear General.'

The husky voice of Escoiquiz broke suddenly from the great bed.

'Please sit down again. There is wine at your elbow, an excellent Valdepeñas, such as I never expected to find as far north as this unhappy town.'

Savary looked from one to the other. Escoiquiz was leaning half out of the bed, his thin neck protruding from its profusion of bright scarves like that of some tropic bird of prey. Ceballos was breathing hard. He, too, made a gesture towards the chair and, himself rising, picked up the bottle of Valdepeñas. Savary, allowing himself to be pacified, sat down again. For a moment the trickling of the wine into his glass was the only sound.

Savary picked up the glass and sipped the wine slowly.

'My dear Minister,' he said, 'I admire your

patriotism and, if you will allow me to say so, I admire the impetuous loyalty which makes you resent anything like interference in your national concerns. But let us face the facts like reasonable men. The affairs of Spain and France are inevitably connected, and it is of paramount importance that the relations of the two countries should not be disturbed. But what am I to conclude from your attitude, my dear Ceballos, and from the fact that His Royal Highness has decided not to go on with his journey?'

Savary dropped his voice a full tone.

'I must conclude,' he went on, 'that your master has unfriendly designs and that he intends to reverse the policy of his predecessor.'

Savary raised the glass to his lips and over its brim he watched the two Spaniards. Escoiquiz was lying back on his pillows, shaken by a fit of coughing. Ceballos was looking straight in front of him. The silence deepened.

It was time to drive the lesson home.

'All this,' continued Savary, 'only goes to show that the Emperor was wise to reserve his decision upon these grave events. His chief concern is the preservation of peace and friendship between two great nations. Perhaps I should do well to repeat here and now his last words to me when I started on this mission. War, he said, between France and Spain is almost inconceivable. It would be a sacrilege.'

Savary paused. This, he thought, was well improvised.

'One last consideration,' he added. 'Your master is deeply committed to this journey. Vittoria is many miles from Madrid. Has he not, perhaps, come too far to draw back at this late hour? There is more than one battalion of French troops in Spain. There is a

whole brigade of them in this town alone, and they are here in execution of a policy agreed between the two Governments concerned. That policy is still in operation.'

Savary spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

'Let me assure you of this, my dear Minister,' he continued, 'if your master's intentions are good, he can have no misgiving about continuing his journey. Should he refuse to do so, His Imperial Majesty will draw his own conclusions.'

He sat back. Ceballos rose abruptly from his chair.

'It is no use, General,' he said, and he fixed his gaze not upon Savary but upon the lean figure prone in the wide bed. 'My master's decision is taken. He will go no further.'

Savary, too, rose to his feet.

He did not look at the Canon in the bed, but turned to Ceballos.

'I have the honour,' he said formally, 'to take note of your Excellency's observations. I shall leave immediately and report these matters to my Imperial master.'

He bowed as he spoke and walked decisively from the room.

§ 3

The door opened wide and a sound of music filtered into the long room. Josephine placed her hand on the Emperor's shoulder. Duroc, the Grand Marshal, was standing beside them. He bowed clumsily.

'They are beneath the window, sir, and they desire to honour Your Majesties according to the custom of the country.'

Duroc waited, and Josephine turned to Napoleon.

The Emperor had her already by the hand.

'We will see these people,' he said.

He was smiling as he drew her towards the window. Her sense of well-being deepened as she fell into step beside him.

'This house is not so bad,' she said happily, leaning a little on his arm.

'Better than my lodging in the Place d'Armes at Bayonne,' he declared. 'Full of noise and dust. Not that I minded it much. But you, my dear Josephine, would have found it intolerable.'

'Marrac will do very well,' she said softly, her eyes sweeping the long room with approval.

The walls were hung with tapestries representing hunting scenes, which Duroc had requisitioned from some of the notables of the country. The furniture, she noted, was old-fashioned, but in keeping with the room, and those Louis XIII tables were really extraordinary; massive enough to carry an ox.

She stepped to the window behind the Emperor. It was a warm afternoon and the park surrounding the castle was fresh and green. A small wind was busy in the trees and rippling the surface of the Nieve.

All this made a pleasant background for the groups under the window. At sight of the Emperor a thin clapping of hands arose and the doll-like figures bowed rustically.

'Rather like Duroc,' thought Josephine.

Suddenly the high note of a flute sounded through the nimble air. Napoleon put his hand on her arm.

'Look,' he said, 'it is charming.'

Josephine gazed down. Seventeen persons, seven youths and ten girls, were beginning to dance. They moved with the ease of habit. Behind them, in a semi-

circle, stood their companions, men and women, with tambourines and castanets, while under an oak a little further off was an orchestra playing flutes and guitars.

The dancers moved in an intricate pattern. The youths were in tight-fitting white breeches and white silk stockings. Their coats were short with large epaulettes and beneath them they wore loose vests of fine woollen cloth relieved with gold. Their hair was caught up in a knot behind, Spanish fashion. The girls wore short skirts of light blue silk which rose about their hips, showing pink silk stockings heavily embroidered with silver thread. Their heads were bare, their hair tied with ribbons, and upon their full white arms black bracelets gleamed in the sun.

Josephine, watching the figures that postured beneath her, heard the voice of Duroc in her ear.

'It is the Pamperruque, Majesty; a local dance of great antiquity. It is used to pay homage to great persons.'

The figures paused and sank to the ground. Josephine clapped her hands.

The Emperor leaned forward and, as the dancers rose to their feet, he too clapped his hands.

'Duroc,' said the Emperor, 'see that a suitable present is given.'

The members of his suite grouped on the terrace below, seeing his gesture, hastened to applaud and the dancers swept away in a whirl of skirts and pink stockings.

This was better than Josephine had dared to hope. Napoleon seemed content and Paris was far away. She turned suddenly.

'Show me the rest of the house,' she begged. 'I must see it all.'

She smiled at him. Was he really moved or was

it only her imagination? He nodded and took her hand.

‘Lead the way, Duroc,’ he directed. ‘I hope for your sake and mine that you have made the Empress really comfortable. Otherwise there is a bad time coming for both of us.’

Josephine laughed with real happiness as he pulled her along the room towards the door. Napoleon was in a holiday mood. A girl stood aside and swept a curtsy as they passed through the door. Josephine smiled at her. She felt Napoleon hesitate a moment at her side.

‘Who is that?’ he asked.

Duroc beckoned to the girl, who came forward, flushing. She had a tip-tilted nose and wide eyes.

‘Mademoiselle Guillebeau, sir,’ said Duroc.

‘My new reading-girl,’ added Josephine.

Napoleon smiled and tapped the girl on the cheek.

‘I hope she reads well,’ he said.

Josephine passed from the room. The Emperor’s hand was still in hers and he was pressing her fingers. That he should notice the reading-girl was according to plan. There would be the less to fear from the Polish woman, derelict in Paris.

‘The Empress’s private boudoir,’ announced Duroc.

Josephine stood a moment in the doorway.

‘It is ravishing,’ she said.

The room was hung with pale blue and a tall narrow window showed a view of the park. Here, perhaps, was a resting-place. The Polish woman was all for politics, but that was not the way to please Napoleon, who cared for no politics but his own, which at the moment seemed to be leading him back into the home circle. He would send packing the royalties of Spain. That was a pleasant thought. It made life feel once

again familiar and secure. Yet another of the old dynasties of Europe would go down, and the event was unlikely to favour his chances of finding a bride from those that still remained.

Decidedly fate was kind, but would the ultimate favour be granted? Perhaps here, in the quiet of the countryside, with the spring burgeoning all about them, she, too, might be fruitful. If fate would grant her that!

‘Day-dreaming, Josephine?’

The Emperor’s grip on her hand tightened. He led her across the boudoir and pushed back the painted door with its panels of copper scroll work. The bedroom was smaller than the boudoir, and the bed, in the form of an opalescent shell with its foot carved and painted to represent the rippling of waves upon sand, rested against the wall. A window stood wide to the afternoon sunshine.

‘Charming,’ she said mechanically.

She moved to the window, stretching out a hand to the sunlight. Under it the grass was bright with fallen blossoms from a sycamore. In the middle distance a grenadier of the Guard in his blue-and-white uniform was walking across a wide stretch of grass, his arm encircling one of the dancers. Her head was on his shoulder and she hung upon him, almost carried in the rhythm of his walk.

Josephine felt a hand at her waist.

‘That fellow isn’t wasting his time,’ came the voice of the Emperor beside her.

She turned to him and there was a look in his face that she had not seen since the old days in the Rue de la Victoire. He swung her round and his eyes went to the great bed, smooth and cool.

She saw they were alone.

‘I am a soldier, too,’ he laughed, and moving quickly to the door he turned the key.

§ 4

Canon Escoiquiz raised his lean head wearily. He had been two hours with his royal master in the upper room, and Ferdinand, when he condescended to speak at all, had confined himself to violent requests for counsel which he as violently rejected. Escoiquiz was at the end of his patience. His head was still heavy with the cold which he had brought with him from Burgos and his ears were buzzing. Or was it the noise of the good people of Vittoria in the square below? They had been in the square all day, shouting and singing, and the night before they had lit bonfires and danced beneath Ferdinand’s window and called him king and swore that he should never leave them.

Ceballos moved in his chair. He was seated at the table opposite Ferdinand, who was staring at him owlishly.

‘Your turn, Ceballos,’ he said. ‘Have you nothing to say?’

‘We have considered the situation in all its aspects,’ said Ceballos.

‘But decided nothing.’

Ceballos flushed angrily.

‘The situation is not of my making,’ he said. ‘Your Majesty should never have left Madrid.’

Ferdinand looked gloomily at his counsellors.

‘Can neither of you suggest anything? Blood of Christ, what am I to do?’

‘Majesty,’ came the voice of Escoiquiz.

Ferdinand turned on him savagely, thrusting out his lower jaw.

'Majesty today, but how much longer will it be Majesty? You bring me more than half way towards that damned French Emperor and then you come round with "Don't go, Majesty", and "He's up to no good, Majesty", and the rest of it. But tell me what will happen if I continue to sit here? The fellow will come to me and he will come with forty thousand men. Then where shall we be?'

Ferdinand had risen to his feet during this tirade. Now he sat down abruptly and passed a heavy hand across his face. Escoiquiz made a noise in his throat.

'Savary will return,' he said.

Ceballos nodded.

'Savary will certainly return.'

'The Emperor will want to know why His Majesty finds himself unable to complete his journey,' continued Escoiquiz. 'I think I have found the answer.'

Ferdinand raised his heavy head.

'You will tell him, I suppose, that I distrust his intentions. The answer to that will be another French army marching through the passes.'

His head fell forward on his breast. On a little table beside him stood an empty carafe of brandy.

'What I had in mind was this,' said Escoiquiz, barking noisily and spitting into the fireplace.

He raised his voice to pierce the ears of Majesty.

'When General Savary returns you will send for him at once. You will express regret for having distrusted, even for a moment, the intentions of Napoleon, and you will inform him that, as evidence of your sincerity, you are leaving at once for the frontier.'

Escoiquiz sat back. He looked first at his sovereign, whose head was still sunk on his breast, and then at Ceballos, who returned the look without enthusiasm.

Ferdinand lifted his head.

I am to walk into the trap. Is that the idea?'

'Merely as evidence of good faith,' continued the Canon.

'I am nevertheless to start?'

'Your Majesty will make every effort to start. But you will be prevented.'

'Prevented?' echoed Ferdinand.

'By the people of the town.'

Ceballos jumped to his feet.

'I see what you mean, Canon. It is not a bad way out.'

'*Force majeure*,' said Ferdinand with a heavy grin.

'Isn't that what they call it?'

Ceballos walked across the room to his sovereign.

'We will put it about that the French Emperor has commanded His Majesty, the King of Spain, to leave his dominions. That will be quite enough.'

Ferdinand was frowning, his glossy eyebrows wrinkling like the skin of a snake.

'We've done that before,' he pointed out. 'These popular uprisings do not seem to impress General Savary.'

'Savary will see this one for himself,' said the Canon, 'and seeing is believing.'

'Leave it to me, sir,' put in Ceballos, rubbing his hands. 'I promise you it shall be quite convincing.'

He swept a hand towards the window as he spoke and, in the silence that followed, the room was filled with the stir and rustle of the people. Somewhere, far off, a man was singing. The two Ministers looked first at one another and then at their king.

Ceballos shook his head.

The King of Spain and Emperor of the Indies had fallen suddenly asleep, his head sunk between his elbows on the table.

§ 5

General Savary stifled a yawn. False dawn must be very near, but the Emperor took no account of his time or of other men's.

The incisive voice continued.

'Twenty-four years of age and still follows his tutor.'

'Obstinate, sir, nevertheless, and difficult to move.'

'He has no knowledge of men or affairs. He will be a tool in the hands of his Ministers. He will be overruled, and the men about him, you say, are all hostile to France.'

'They have ideas, sir, that will not be agreeable or convenient to Your Majesty. Ferdinand is ready with a pocketful of promises, but is unlikely to fulfil them.'

Napoleon opened his snuff-box with a snap, taking a pinch but scattering most of the powder untidily over his uniform.

'I must take a hand in his education. Hereditary princes should not play at revolution. I shall make it clear that either he comes here to me or that I shall conclude the whole matter with his father.'

The Emperor leaned forward as he spoke and struck a bell sharply.

Méneval appeared at the door.

'I want to send off an urgent letter,' said Napoleon.

Without a word Méneval sat down at a little table in the corner.

Napoleon, his arms behind his back, began pacing to and fro. Savary leaned back as Napoleon began to dictate:

'MY BROTHER,

'I have received the letter in which Your Royal Highness announces his succession.'

Napoleon, turning, saw that Savary was nodding in his chair.

‘Sleep till I have finished,’ he said. ‘At dawn you will be riding post again.’

The Emperor, with a gesture to Méneval, continued to dictate. Savary, unable, like his master, to sleep at will, followed intermittently the phrases as they came.

‘You will have seen from your father’s papers the interest I have always taken in his welfare. So you will allow me now to speak to you with frankness and loyalty.

‘I had hoped to come to Madrid and persuade my august friend to make certain necessary reforms in his dominions which would give public satisfaction. . . . Events in the North retarded my journey and the occurrences at Aranjuez have intervened.

‘I do not constitute myself a judge of what happened or of the conduct of the Prince of the Peace, but I know very well that it is very dangerous to Kings for the people to become accustomed to shedding blood in attempts to obtain justice. God grant that Your Highness may not find it so yourself. . . . Remember that people like to avenge themselves for the respect they have been compelled to show us.

‘Consider, moreover, that a cause could not be framed against the Prince of the Peace without your framing it also against the King and Queen, your parents. . . . The result would be fatal to the crown. To this crown Your Royal Highness has no rights beyond those transmitted by your mother and, if the cause soils her honour, Your Highness destroys your own rights. Do not listen to weak, perfidious counsels. Your Highness has no right to judge the Prince of the Peace; the sins which are imputed to him disappear in the rights of the throne. . . .

‘I tell Your Royal Highness that, if the abdication of Charles was spontaneous, and he was not forced to it by the insurrection and consequent rioting in Aranjuez, I have no objection to admitting it and acknowledging Your Royal Highness as King of Spain. I therefore desire to confer with Your Royal Highness on this matter. . . .’

The Emperor's voice rose and fell. Savary's head fell forward, but soon he started again into wakefulness. The Emperor was still dictating:

'Your Royal Highness knows all the depth of my heart. You will observe that I am full of many ideas which require consideration. You can be sure that in any case I shall behave to you as I have to the King, your father.

'Your Royal Highness must be assured of my desire to arrange matters and to find occasion of giving you proofs of my affection and esteem.

'May God have you in His holy and worthy keeping.'

The voice ceased and Savary, as though his consciousness had been held in being on this slender thread, remembered nothing further till he heard again the bell on the Emperor's table. He looked at the clock. Nearly an hour had passed. Napoleon was busy in his chair, annotating despatches.

Méneval came into the room bearing a paper. Napoleon glanced through it quickly and signed his name. He smiled across at Savary.

'Here is your letter. Take it at once to Vittoria. Deliver it to Ferdinand without comment. He will come, if he is wise, to Bayonne. I hope that wisdom will prevail. But'—here the Emperor paused and looked slyly at Savary—'he pleases himself in this matter. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly, sir,' said Savary, getting to his feet.

The Emperor paused.

'Let the Prince of the Asturias know that I have received letters from the King and Queen and that I have ordered Murat to send the Prince of the Peace under escort to Bayonne along with other Spanish notables, including Dazenza, Minister for the Indies.'

Savary bowed.

'I will make it clear to His Royal Highness,' he

said, 'that Your Majesty needs all possible advice in settling the affairs of Spain.'

§ 6

Savary climbed off his horse. He had felt ready to drop with fatigue on entering the town, but weariness had since given place to excitement. It had taken him more than half an hour to force his way from the city gates to the Plaza del Rey. The twisted streets of Vittoria were jammed with folk. He had thought at first that it was a fiesta. The Spaniards were a lazy, improvident people, who snatched at any excuse to abstain from work and to drink wine in the sunshine. He had not gone far through the press, however, before reaching certain conclusions.

It was market day to begin with, for there were carts piled high with unsold vegetables and fruit and mules laden with produce for man and beast. One never saw a horse in Spain, except between the thighs of a gentleman or in the ring to be ripped by the maddened bulls. It was the country of the universal mule. Today the mules were everywhere. Their long foolish faces, which were yet so much more cunning than those of horses, stared this way and that, brushing against his boots as he thrust his way forward. And among them, in chattering confusion, moved the muleteers and the farmers, staining the air with the breath of garlic, and not a woman to be seen. But the women of Spain were hardly ever visible. They lurked behind those windows with the curved iron bars, set as a protection against the thief of property or virtue.

Savary did not mind the noise. It stung his ears and kept him awake. He liked less the silence that

preceded and followed his passage. Mouths were suddenly dumb at his approach. Men turned dark faces upon him, from which no sound came, as they caught sight of the undress uniform of a General of the Imperial Guard which he now wore as the bearer of an official despatch from the Emperor to the man who called himself King of Spain.

This silence was more menacing than open throats crying for blood. The crowd was quiet neither in front nor behind him. But his glance would light on a man and the man's mouth would close suddenly and his eyes change.

'Rabble,' thought Savary, but he was glad to reach, at last, the open door of the house where Ferdinand lodged.

The scene that met him was very different from that which he had left barely forty-eight hours before. The house had then been silent, except for the rustling of servants and the murmur of talk behind closed doors, but today it hummed like an orchard in bloom. The passage through which he had forced his way was packed with the sweating bodies of brawny men and these, too, fell silent when he looked at them.

He made his way towards the wide staircase. A door was thrown open on his left and a servant in livery came out hurriedly with a tray in his hands on which stood a silver cup that smelled of cinnamon.

Savary recognised him as one of the royal servants.

'His Honour, the Canon?' he enquired.

'In there, Señor General.'

Savary nodded and entered the room. It was broad, but low and stiflingly hot, for, in the wide hearth to the left, blazed a huge fire of pinewood. Escoiquiz was alone, seated before a small table on which lay the remains of a chicken cooked with

pimento. He was cleaning his teeth thoughtfully with an ivory pick. On seeing Savary he started to his feet.

'Good evening, General,' he said. 'We did not expect you back so soon. You have made great speed.'

'You expected me, then?' said Savary, moving towards the window, which he noted with regret was closed.

'And how is your Honour's cold,' he went on before the other could answer.

'Better, my dear General, better. I trust that His Imperial Majesty is enjoying the best of health?'

'Excellent health,' said Savary.

'You have ridden post?' said the Canon sympathetically.

Savary nodded without speaking.

'Not dined, of course? You must be famished.'

Escoiquiz, leaving the toothpick in the corner of his mouth, clapped his thin hands. The door opened, letting in a dull murmur of sound.

'Food for the General,' he commanded.

Five minutes later Savary was devouring a veal stew, pungent with peppers.

'This is kind of you, my dear Canon,' he said with his mouth full. 'Riding post is good for the appetite. And how is His Royal Highness?'

'His Majesty,' corrected Escoiquiz quietly, 'is upstairs. There is to be a Council of State this evening. His Majesty will be glad to see you before he meets his Ministers. They still advise an immediate return to Madrid and I must warn you, General, that there is a very strong feeling against accepting your Imperial master as an arbiter in our affairs. To be frank with you, General——'

The Canon paused.

Savary made a slight gesture. It intimated a distrust of ecclesiastical candour.

‘Frankness is best,’ he said, and waited.

‘We fear to lose our ships and we dislike the prospect of our country becoming a theatre of war between France and England.’

‘You are looking far ahead.’

‘His Majesty has far-sighted advisers.’

‘Among whom my Imperial master still hopes to be included,’ said Savary dryly.

He laid aside his napkin and rose to his feet.

‘I have the honour to request,’ he added formally, ‘that I be admitted to an audience of His Royal Highness the Prince of the Asturias.’

Escoiquiz also rose.

‘By all means, my dear General. You will find His Majesty upstairs. You know your way and I beg to be excused from coming with you. There are draughts in the passage.’

Savary moved towards the door, thrusting his hand into his breast as he did so, to feel the crackle of Napoleon’s letter against the lining of his coat. The crowd outside the room had thickened since his arrival. Turning left he began to make his way up the broad staircase; but progress was slow. The steps were thronged with peasants and soldiers. All of them were armed, the peasants with naked knives strapped against the dirty leather of their breeches. One and all stared at him as he made his way up.

Savary pushed his way resolutely from step to step.

A peasant thrust himself across his path. Savary paused a moment. The man smelled of drink. His thin neck, burned red by the sun, emerged from an old coat beneath which showed his naked body, the chest matted with black hair.

'Let me pass, fellow,' said Savary.

The peasant's hand went to the horn handle of the knife at his belt.

'Long live King Ferdinand,' he shouted. 'Say it after me, you bloody French general.'

Savary slipped his hand into the pocket of his coat where the little pistol, with its butt inlaid with mother-of-pearl, lay ready. Boutet had made it for him in the Imperial Arms Manufactory at Versailles.

'Long live King Ferdinand,' repeated the peasant.

Savary looked about him. Flushed faces and dark brows were bent on him from every side. The air stank of garlic and wine. The cry was taken up.

'Long live King Ferdinand!'

The house resounded with their shouting and for a moment Savary felt a new sensation. He had never been afraid, though he had been on a score of battle-fields and felt the wind of death often enough as it passed him by.

'I should have shot him down at once and the rest would have been cowed,' he thought. But it was now too late for shooting.

Suddenly from above him a door creaked and a voice came down the stairs.

'Less noise, good friends. His Majesty is resting.'

Savary knew the voice and allowed a small sigh of relief to escape him.

'Minister,' he shouted above the din, 'I bring news.'

'Wait a moment, General.'

There was a shuffle of feet and Ceballos appeared at the top of the stairway.

'Come up, my dear General. His Majesty will receive you immediately.'

Without a word Savary stepped forward. The

drunken peasant thrust himself against the wall to make room and spat as he did so on to the broad stair. Savary passed upwards, looking no more at the sullen faces. On the landing above, Ceballos was waiting by an open door and there they played a little comedy of good manners, disputing with bows and gestures as to who should enter first. Savary prevailed and he followed the Minister into the room.

It was wide and sparsely furnished. At one end of it was a long table on which stood the remains of a meal and at the other end Ferdinand was sitting in an old Bergère chair, with a half-empty glass and a bottle at his elbow. His face was flushed and his eyes bright. On seeing Savary he got to his feet.

'You see, my dear General,' he exclaimed without any preliminaries, 'how they acclaim me. I am powerless to prevent my people from showing their affection.'

'Your Royal Highness is indeed fortunate,' answered Savary quietly.

He pulled out the folded paper which had lain against his heart for a day and a night.

'I am the bearer of a letter from His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of the French,' he announced formally, and offered it to Ferdinand.

Ceballos hurried forward and took it from Savary.

Savary suppressed a smile with difficulty, but the Spanish etiquette must be observed.

Ceballos fell on one knee, holding out the letter.

'I have the honour,' he intoned, 'to hand to Your Majesty the letter remitted to me as Your Majesty's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs by General Savary, Envoy Extraordinary of His Imperial Majesty, Napoleon, Emperor of the French.'

Ferdinand took the letter and broke the seal as Ceballos rose to his feet.

There was a long silence as the Bourbon read the closely penned lines, frowning heavily.

His brow cleared and he handed the letter to Ceballos.

‘Inform His Imperial Majesty’s Envoy Extraordinary,’ he said, as though Savary were not in the room, ‘that this letter from His Imperial Majesty will be considered by my Council immediately. You will then give orders for an early start.’

Ceballos turned and was about to speak when Savary stepped forward, brushing aside the web of etiquette.

‘May I ask in which direction Your Royal Highness contemplates moving tomorrow?’

Ferdinand looked at him a moment and thrust out his under lip.

‘For France,’ he said abruptly and grinned nervously at Savary.

‘For France,’ he repeated. ‘I think my Council will agree with me that this letter alters everything.’

§ 7

‘Brandy,’ said Savary to the tousled youth with the leather apron who stood awkwardly in front of him. He was seated, having changed into plain clothes, in the main room of a wineshop on the square. The room was packed with townsmen of better class than the mob of peasants outside and, in one corner, where the talk was enlivened with graceful gestures of the thumb and first finger, Savary perceived someone whom he took to be the Mayor himself from the deference paid him by his neighbours. Savary stretched his legs beneath the wooden table as the boy appeared with the brandy.

‘You can leave the bottle,’ said Savary.

The brandy would keep him awake. He had slept only four hours in the last three days, but men did not sleep in the service of the Emperor.

His ears tonight must be even sharper than usual and he had sharp ears. They had made his reputation. He sat silent, listening to the talk about him and sipping his brandy. It was the best they could give him, but it tasted sickly sweet to a French palate.

He wriggled uncomfortably in his plain clothes. He had borrowed them from the senior Colonel of General Verdier, who had been very kind. But the Colonel's tailor was not of the best and the Colonel was a spare man. The mustard-coloured coat was tight under the arms and the silk lining was of poor quality. But it served its purpose, exhibiting its wearer as a man of peace, who, to anyone who challenged him, might be a silk merchant from Lyons looking into the possibilities of establishing a connection with Madrid.

So young Ferdinand was going north tomorrow, at an early hour, to meet the Emperor? That was what he had said. But he had only just refrained from winking at Ceballos as he had said it. Savary distrusted this sudden victory. The effect of the Emperor's letter had been miraculous, and Savary did not believe in miracles.

Something was in the wind.

'Twenty of you in the north-west corner by the statue of the Virgin, and you will cry "Long live the King!"'

The man whom Savary took for the Mayor was speaking.

'And if any Frenchman should interfere, knock him down and use your boots, such of you as have them.'

A priest with no bridge to his nose leaned across the bare table.

'Knives,' he was saying, 'should be used, according to Hippocrates, in the third intercostal space.'

A peasant clapped the priest on the shoulder, and Savary recognised in him the man on the stairs who had ordered him to shout for Ferdinand.

'We will make them dance,' he said, 'and I know my man when I see him. He went in grinning to the King today. He shall grin wider tomorrow, under the chin.'

The Mayor held up a restraining hand.

'None of that, my friends. Your business tomorrow is to keep the King in Vittoria. If the soldiers interfere, God help them; but this is no time for killing. I'm not one for spoiling any man's sport, but we don't want that damned Emperor of theirs coming over the frontier with forty thousand men. If you must use your knives, there will be traces to cut. The harness is old and mended with ropes: easy work for your steel.'

'But should they interfere, your Worship?' said the priest.

'God help them,' said the peasant. 'But this is solemn talk for a summer evening, Reverend Father. Tell us a story. Tell his Worship the tale of the archdeacon and the choristers.'

The Mayor slapped his leg and roared with laughter.

Savary sat back in his dark corner and poured himself out another glass of brandy. The room was full of sound and movement. The Mayor's table had passed from politics to bawdy.

'There was a certain Archdeacon of Seville, one Don Carlos Niños de la Palma . . . ' began the priest.

Savary waited till the attention of the audience was engaged. Then he pushed the brandy away from him,

got to his feet, left a coin on the table and moved unobtrusively towards the door and into the square.

Ten minutes later he was sitting at the citadel with Verdier, drawn reluctantly from his evening game of Lanzquenet. Savary was short and swift.

'There will be trouble in the streets tomorrow morning,' he said. 'Make quite certain that no Frenchman in this town gives the slightest excuse for disorder and confine your troops to barracks, General. Avoid all provocation.'

'Very good, General,' said Verdier.

'I want you, however, to be ready to act, if necessary, and I think you had better be reinforced.'

Verdier nodded.

'I'm devilish short of guns,' he grumbled.

'Pen, ink and paper,' said Savary.

Verdier pointed to his writing-table. Savary sat down, scrawled an order and got to his feet, scattering sand on the paper.

'Have that sent to Marshal Bessières at Burgos. I'm asking for six squadrons of cavalry and six guns.'

Verdier stood a moment stroking his moustache.

'I will send that young fire-eater de Polhac. He claims that his mare is from the Emperor's stables.'

§ 8

It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning and the brilliant spring sun shone down upon them all. The crowd was tremendous, filling the square with dancing arms and uplifted faces. Savary edged a little closer to His Royal Highness, Prince of the Asturias, who was never, in any circumstances, to be addressed as King. Savary was again in uniform. Escoiquiz, on the other side of the Prince, was leaning forward.

There came from below a clatter of hooves instantly drowned by the roaring of the crowd.

‘It is time Your Majesty started.’

A new voice, of which Savary had heard but little, sounded from the room. The Duque del Infantado, Captain-General of New Castille, pushed his way past Ceballos to Ferdinand’s elbow.

‘Ready,’ answered Ferdinand, thrusting out his under lip.

Ceballos looked significantly at his master.

‘Progress will be difficult, Your Majesty,’ he said.

‘So it would seem,’ said Ferdinand, returning the look.

The window was thrown wide to the square. Savary looked down. Immediately below stood Ferdinand’s coach, its gilt a little tarnished, though it had been washed that morning. Harnessed to the coach were six mules. The equipage was surrounded by a seething crowd in which a tall peasant was conspicuous. In his hand he bore a bright sickle and the crowd made way for him as he stepped forward. A great shout went up as he raised his weapon and slashed at the ropes with which the traces had been repaired. They fell apart and the peasant with the sharp point of the sickle touched one of the mules in the rump. It kicked out viciously and the crowd, roaring approval, made way hastily as it bounded forward with a jingle of trailing harness.

‘Long live King Ferdinand!’

The cry shook the houses.

The mules were driven from the square, slapped and prodded by zealous spirits. The mob under the window formed a ring and, joining hands, danced merrily around the great coach, standing forlorn and derelict at the door of the house.

Ferdinand turned to Savary and his face was flushed.

‘You see, General,’ he said, ‘my good people of Vittoria will not allow me to go. It is unfortunate, but what can I do? It is a case of . . . er . . . *force majeure*.’

Savary looked steadily at the Prince and from the Prince to Ceballos, Infantado and the rest. The silence became uneasy.

‘An ingenious comedy, Highness,’ he said at last. ‘But the Emperor prefers plain dealing.’

‘I do not understand you, General,’ put in Ceballos quickly.

‘I think you understand me very well,’ said Savary bluntly. ‘If it should be my duty to inform the Emperor that you have decided not to meet him, I should be sorry if I were obliged to add that, lacking the courage to take this decision openly, you had found it necessary to resort to a subterfuge which I venture to describe as unworthy of the high position to which His Royal Highness aspires.’

‘Take care, General,’ said Ceballos angrily. ‘Do you presume to hold the King responsible for what has just occurred?’

‘I presume to think that the Prince can control his subjects and the Emperor will regret that he does not control them to better purpose. If, however, it is true that His Royal Highness is being compelled to act against his better judgment, I am prepared to offer him escort and protection. I must make it quite clear, however, that a plea of *force majeure*, based on the comedy at which we have just assisted, will not be admitted.’

‘Where, then, are your soldiers, General? I do not see them in the square this morning.’

‘ Confined to barracks, Excellency. Comedies call for a happy ending and I felt it necessary to guard against any serious disorder. Do you suggest that I communicate with General Verdier? I have arranged for him to be adequately reinforced.’

Ferdinand had gone pale beneath his olive skin.

‘ I am to go to Bayonne as your prisoner, General? ’

Savary’s answer, delivered to the company at large, was prompt and decisive.

‘ His Royal Highness misunderstands me completely. He acts of his own free will and pleasure. Should he desire to return to Madrid, and should he formally request me to carry that decision to the Emperor, I need hardly say that not a soldier shall be moved or a hand lifted in restraint of his wishes.’

Ferdinand looked helplessly round the silent group.

‘ Bring back the mules,’ he said at last. ‘ We shall start for Bayonne in an hour.’

§ 9

‘ Do you hear that? I wonder what it means? ’

Napoleon, turning in his saddle, was radiant. He had been waiting, as Savary knew, all that morning for the guns to speak.

‘ Guns, sir,’ repeated Savary dutifully. ‘ It is the salvo from the forts of Bayonne. The Prince of the Asturias has arrived.’

The Emperor nodded.

‘ We will go to meet him,’ he said, and set spurs to his horse.

The pleasant country was green, and Savary, though his body was sore, was light of heart. He had ridden post from Vittoria and announced that Ferdinand was

following behind his mules. This was success, and the Emperor, though silent, was smiling.

They cantered into the city and, as they reached it, the escort of Polish light horse closed round them lifting easily in their saddles, their uniforms brilliant in the sunlight.

In the square Napoleon drew rein. A coach, dusty with travel and with sweating mules attached to it, was drawn up in front of a tall, thin house. The Emperor moved towards it and, as he did so, the coach rolled slowly away in charge of a single postilion. A lackey in a livery of grey leaped to the Emperor's stirrup. The hooves of the escort rang on the stones of the square. Napoleon dismounted and beckoned to Savary, who fell in behind him. A door was thrown open and a voice called suddenly:

'The Emperor!'

Savary, at Napoleon's heels, found himself in a wide room, with a chandelier of glass, from which several clusters were missing, hanging slightly askew. Ferdinand, a head taller than Napoleon, had risen from a chair. He wore his usual look of sullen resentment. In the background Savary perceived Escoiquiz, Ceballos and Infantado.

Napoleon showed not the slightest hesitation or constraint.

'I am glad to meet Your Royal Highness at last,' he said, and formally embraced his visitor.

Ferdinand muttered something which Savary could not catch.

'Guns, my brother?' said Napoleon, and laughed. 'Not a formal salute, but this is hardly a formal visit.'

Ferdinand's eyes, shifting distastefully about the room, lit upon the chandelier.

'Nor is this, I fear, a palace,' continued the

Emperor, 'but it is the best this small town can offer. Duroc shall wait upon you tomorrow. He has often had to make me feel at home in worse quarters. But this evening I hope you will give me the pleasure of dining with me at Marrac.'

Napoleon looked keenly towards the group that stood respectfully in the corner of the room. Ferdinand made no movement to present his Ministers and it fell to Savary to bring them forward.

'I am glad to see you, gentlemen,' said the Emperor cordially. 'We have grave matters to discuss and we shall need your good advice.'

§ 10

Marie Walewska looked up a moment from her letter to watch the setting sun which was streaming obliquely into the drawing-room of her house in the Rue d'Houssaye.

Felix was a faithful correspondent. He had promised to let her have news of the Emperor. So far he had been as good as, if not better than, his word. His letters were quick and vivid, and through his eyes she had seen already a bright succession of scenes and incidents at Marrac and Bayonne.

From Napoleon had come no word at all. Was it that the thought of her troubled his scheming? Had she become, perhaps, the unhappiest of all things for a woman—an influence resented?

She returned to the scribbled page.

I told you in my last letter of the arrival of Prince Ferdinand. Since then he has spoken, it is said, some three words or so, but seldom to the point. The opinion here is that the Spaniards are well rid of him and should be grateful to the Emperor for keeping him from further mischief.

His illustrious parents turned up on the thirtieth, yesterday, and the Emperor went to meet them—full honours this time, with troops all down the street and a hundred-and-one guns giving them the royal salute from the forts above the harbour.

The Emperor was attended by the Polish Light Cavalry of the Imperial Guard, among whom was your brother, looking very well. The Emperor rode the bay gelding and looked very fine. He does not ride so badly, for all they say.

Walewska smiled. She knew how a man should sit a horse, but she admired Felix for his loyalty. No one could claim that Napoleon had a good seat.

The old couple are lodged in a house on the road to Biarritz. They arrived in the most ridiculous great coach, an enormous affair, said to have belonged to Charles III, though it might have been used by Noah himself—huge wheels and a box seat large enough for three drivers seated abreast, pulled by eight of the most vicious-looking mules you ever saw. But I am told they can go. The Emperor helped the old King out himself. The pair made a striking contrast, the Emperor very charming in a masterful kind of way and the King visibly touched and grateful for his reception.

I felt sorry for the King—a pitiful sight, all tied in knots with rheumatism and very stiff on his feet. He has the Hapsburg nose and lip—more of it than most of them—and is very red in the face, his hair being snow-white and receding from a high forehead. What really astonished me was his shocking neglect of his person. Saving your presence, madam, you can smell him yards off, and they say he never changes his breeches, which are stained with blood. Blood of the chase he calls it, but there isn't much of the chase in his sort of hunting. He has the beasts driven by the hundred into an enclosure and just goes in and kills the lot.

I heard a good story about him yesterday in the Guards' mess. He spends most of his spare time—about eighteen hours out of twenty-four—killing beasts, as aforesaid, doing carpentry, mending watches or playing the fiddle. The best musicians in Spain are pressed into his orchestra and they play works by Haydn and Boccherini. One day Olivieri, who is first violin of the

Madrid Opera, ventured to request him very respectfully to take three bars rest at a certain point. The King just tucked his violin under his chin. 'Kings never wait,' he declared, and began to scrape away again just as he pleased. You can judge, madam, of the brilliant effects produced.

The Queen has the remains of beauty, being specially favoured by Nature in the matter of arms and bosom, which are very white and superb. Nature, however, disowns the rest. Anything God gave she has long since destroyed and she has a mouth like a mouse-trap. Forgive me, madam, if I write thus freely. My excuse must be that you bade me do so. She wears her hair in the Greek style, or rather a wig, for I am sure her hair has gone the way of her complexion, and it is garnished with pearls and diamonds. When she took off her cloak, it was seen that she was wearing a gown of yellow taffeta with an overdress of English lace.

Evidently she makes the most of her arms, which were bare except for bracelets of magnificent pearls, clasped by a single ruby. Her eyes are very brilliant, but small.

Charles asked at once for his dear Godoy, ex-Prince of the Peace, who has been lodged three or four miles further down the road in the suburbs of Biarritz, lest he should meet by accident the Prince of the Asturias, his mortal enemy.

The King and Queen of Spain dined with His Imperial Majesty at Marrac last night. The Emperor showed them the greatest consideration. You know how charming he can be. He went himself to the door to meet the old King. The dining-room at Marrac is on the first floor adjoining the State apartments and Charles hesitated when he saw the stairs, for, as I told you, he is very rheumatic. The Emperor bent forward and offered him his arm. 'Lean on me,' I heard him say. 'I am strong enough for both of us.' The old King was very pleased at that remark. He took no notice whatever of the Prince of the Asturias, who stood amongst the lackeys at the foot of the stairs.

I was on duty in the dining-room and they had already finished the first course when the Prince of the Peace arrived. He had hardly entered the room before the old King, forgetting all etiquette, jumped to his feet and hobbled round the table to embrace him. Yet all the world knows that Godoy is the

Queen's lover. Perhaps the old man knows it too, and doesn't care.

The Emperor, of course, directed that Godoy should be given a seat and the old King insisted that he should sit next to him, called him 'my dear Manuel' and kept on pressing his hands, while the Queen was loud in her expressions of horror at what those brutes—Her Majesty's subjects, mark you—had done to him, and I must tell you that they had left their marks upon his face. He was, nevertheless, in full court dress, complete with orders.

And so they all dined together, madam, in the greatest amity. And after that I can tell you only gossip, for I have not seen the Emperor nor the Spanish royalties for the last three days. There have been many comings and goings, the Emperor being daily closeted with Charles and Godoy. He has not once sent for Ferdinand, but he sees a good deal of a tall, smooth-faced canon, Escoiquiz, who is the Prince's confidential man. He is a deep fellow and I hear that the Emperor told him so to his face only yesterday, and that there has been a good deal of friendly talk between them and ear-pulling.

There was an incident yesterday. Young Ferdinand, it seems, has been writing letters home to the Junta, or whatever they call it, in Madrid. The Emperor doesn't trust him an inch and, of course, the letters were intercepted. They were full of references to the Corsican and French rascals and the Emperor was described as coming to Bayonne to be greeted by no more than a dozen ragamuffins who ran before his horse and cried 'Long live the Emperor!' and these paid by the police to do so. All nonsense of course, for the Emperor is very popular with the citizens, but very significant of the writer's disposition. Ferdinand has had the nerve to make most uncivil references to the Emperor and his policy. He seems properly to have cooked his goose and I don't give much for his chances.

Everyone wonders what is going to happen. Personally I hope the Emperor will send them all packing. The Spaniards are said to be proud and not at all inclined to accept a French ruler, but no country in its senses could hesitate between the Emperor and this Spanish crew. They say, moreover, that Spain, left to herself, will not follow the Emperor's policy and so deserves not to be considered.

I must end now, madam, for the Paris courier leaves in ten minutes.

Pray believe me, with deep respect,
always your most obedient and devoted servant,

FELIX MARBOT

P.S.—May I venture to remind you, madam, of my earnest desire to join the Imperial Armies. My brother is with the Grand Duke of Berg in Madrid and, when I think of the battles he has seen, I grow desperate for service, and everybody here talks of nothing but the wars to come.

Walewska folded up the letter.

She picked up her miniature of the Emperor and stood awhile gazing at it. Then, as a servant entered with candles, she started and moved slowly towards the door. Outside it was now dark, for the sun had sunk below the roofs of the houses opposite.

Paris, too, seemed to be waiting.

§ 11

Marcellin Marbot straightened himself from the wall against which he was leaning. Felix came forward almost at a run. The sight of him, very neat in his blue coat, made Marcellin the more aware of his own condition. The dust flew as Felix clapped a hand upon his shoulder.

Marcellin had no time to lose in greetings.

‘I must see the Emperor,’ he said.

‘Despatches?’

Marcellin nodded wearily.

‘From Madrid. The news is still behind me. Bad tidings travel fast, but I have ridden night and day. The Emperor is informed of my arrival and I expect to be taken to him at once. Go back to your quarters. Give me a bath, if you can; wine, if you have to steal it,

and a bed, even if it be your own. I shall need it for twenty-four hours.'

He looked with an assured mastery at his brother, a stripling edition of himself. But Felix, he noted, had broadened perceptibly. The lad was growing up. Soon they would be alike as two peas.

'Then it is bad news, Marcellin?'

'Prepare for trouble when the Emperor hears it.'

'You are to come at once, Captain Marbot.'

An aide-de-camp had appeared round the corner of the house and was standing beside them.

Marcellin began mechanically to brush his dusty coat.

'No need to worry about that,' said the aide-de-camp.

'Good luck to you,' said Felix.

'I need it,' responded Marcellin as he turned and walked stiffly away.

He passed through a doorway in a stone wall covered with ivy and other creeping plants. Thence he was led along a short path to a broad terrace lined with trees. Some fifty yards away stood a group of splendid figures.

'The Emperor has just finished dinner,' said the aide-de-camp in his ear.

Marcellin forgot his aching thighs and knees and walked forward, his spurs chinking on the gravel.

A short woman dressed in black stood with Napoleon. She wore a mantilla of finest lace, and diamonds twinkled in odd places on her dress. From her square face, loose and pallid, two beady black eyes looked forth restlessly. Some paces away from them an old man leaned heavily on a stick. He had a red, stupefied face that emerged incongruously from a magnificently embroidered coat. But the coat was soiled and hung shapeless above dirty blood-stained leather breeches. The Emperor lifted his head on catching

sight of Marbot and moved forward a pace or two. Marbot came to a halt and saluted.

‘News from Madrid?’ said the Emperor.

The Queen turned petulantly and walked towards a tall man who stood a little apart from the rest. Emanuel Godoy, Marcellin noted, was in high fettle, a very different figure from the pleading wretch who had crawled for refuge from his countrymen into Murat’s headquarters a few days before.

Marcellin stiffened to attention and looked fixedly at the Emperor, proffering, as he did so, the sealed despatch.

Napoleon extended a plump well-shaped hand, took the despatch and moved to one side. There was silence, broken only by the crackle of breaking wax and the crumpling of paper. Napoleon turned a page. A mutter of conversation broke out between members of the royal party.

Marcellin still stood stiffly to attention. To him the murmuring figures on the terrace, brilliant in the afternoon sunlight, were remote effigies, obsolete as the medieval towers behind them. Present and future were summed up in the short figure in the green coat and white breeches who stood quietly reading within a few paces of him.

The Emperor turned abruptly.

‘Come with me, Captain Marbot,’ he said, and walked towards a little alley of cypresses which left the main sweep of the terrace some yards away.

Marcellin followed obediently. The Emperor, he noted, paid small heed to the Spanish King and Queen. Between the first cypresses he stopped suddenly.

‘Captain Marbot,’ he said, ‘this is bad news. I am told that you can give me further details. You were present?’

‘ Yes, sir.’

‘ Tell me what happened?’

The Emperor glanced at the paper in his hand.

‘ I see the Grand Duke shot two hundred of the rebels. Give me an account.’

He laid a hand on Marbot’s arm and began to walk down the alley.

‘ The trouble, sir, started the day before, on the 1st of May. A rumour had somehow got abroad that Your Majesty had given the Grand Duke of Berg orders to send the young Prince, Don Francisco, after the rest of the family to Bayonne. The whole town was in a ferment. It could not suffer the last member of the royal house to leave the country.’

‘ Well?’

The Emperor’s voice was sharp at his elbow. Marcellin hesitated a moment.

‘ Tell me the facts,’ the Emperor said impatiently.

‘ A big crowd assembled at the Puerta del Sol on the evening before the riots. There were many people, too, in the main streets. The crowd was dispersed without difficulty by cavalry and we expected no further trouble. The people in the streets, however, peasants for the most part, had found shelter in the houses. On the following morning the city was buzzing worse than ever. Not much attention was paid to all this movement at first. The Spaniards seem to spend most of their time in the streets making as much noise as possible. But the most extraordinary rumours were going round.’

‘ For instance?’

‘ It was said that, just as the royal family were making ready to start for Bayonne according to Your Majesty’s orders, Don Francisco refused to be taken to the coach.’

‘What, that child?’

‘It was even put about that he clung to the leg of a table and started to scream the place down. The situation then got entirely out of hand. The peasants and the roughs of the town swarmed into the streets and started to attack our people. They just went clean crazy and were out to kill any Frenchman they could find.’

‘Where were the troops?’

‘The troops were in camp, sir, outside Madrid.’

The pressure on Marcellin’s arm increased.

What did you see of it, personally? I want an eye-witness account.’

‘I was lodged in a house close to the headquarters of the Grand Duke of Berg. When I heard the shooting I mounted at once and prepared to go to headquarters. My host, however, urged me to go on foot, sir, and not to take the direct road. He was good enough to take me into his garden and let me out by a side-door. Then he led me, through by-ways, to the back of headquarters where I found a guard.’

‘What was the name of this gentleman?’

‘Don Antonio Hernandez, sir. I reached the Grand Duke of Berg about seven in the morning. He had with him at his headquarters two weak battalions of infantry and a few squadrons of dragoons. He entered the streets at the head of his battalions, sending staff officers immediately to collect the troops from outside the town. I received orders to warn the cavalry of the Guard which was stationed at a place called Buen Retiro.’

‘How did you get there? Tell me everything.’

‘I rode out from headquarters. There were two main streets to cross, the Calle d’Alcala and the Calle de San Geronimo. I had an escort of four dragoons with me and almost at once we were sniped from the

houses. Fortunately they were not very good sharpshooters. The horse of one of my dragoons was killed. The mob in the streets rushed at him when he was down, but we got him away.'

Marcellin paused a moment.

'Well?'

'I got to the Buen Retiro, sir, and reported to General Daumesnil, who told me to lead his men to the Puerta del Sol. By that time it was about eight in the morning and the riot was spreading. We rode at a gallop.'

'Who was leading?'

'The Mamelukes, sir, and, after them, the squadrons of the Guard. We were heavily sniped the whole way to the Puerta del Sol, especially from the residence of the Duke of Híjar. We lost several men in this way, among them, I'm sorry to report, sir, the Mameluke Mustapha.'

Marcellin paused again. The whole scene, in all its vivid detail, flamed once more before his eyes. The hot dust was in his nostrils, with the rank sweat of the men and horses and the stench of blood. In his ears was the clatter of hooves on hard stone and the terrible roaring of the crowd.

'Mustapha,' came the voice of the Emperor. 'How did he die, Captain Marbot?'

'His horse was shot, sir, and before we could get to him half a dozen of the brutes were at him with their knives. They stabbed him in a dozen places.'

The Emperor thrust his hands sharply behind his back, twisting his arms so that the green stuff of his coat creased and wrinkled. His mouth was a thin line.

'He fought with me at Marengo, and at Austerlitz he promised me the head of the Grand Duke Constantine.'

There was a moment's silence. The Emperor had

moved a pace or two away. Marcellin stood waiting till he turned.

‘Continue, Captain Marbot.’

‘When we reached the Puerta del Sol, sir, the whole place was seething. Many of the mob were armed and wore some kind of uniform. The Grand Duke was already at work and, as soon as the Mamelukes arrived, he sounded the charge. Not that they waited. They were mad to avenge Mustapha and they laid about with their scimitars. I saw some thirty heads jump before I was engaged myself. I charged with the Chasseurs of the Guard and a squadron of dragoons took the rabble in the flank. That finished it for the moment. The people fled up the various streets that lead to the Puerta del Sol. There they ran into the infantry which was converging on the square. It was all over by midday except for the snipers in the house of the Duke de Hajar. The troopers of the Guard dealt with those fellows.’

‘Properly, I hope.’

‘They got in by the ground-floor windows with the Mamelukes and threw the bodies from the balconies into the streets below. You never saw such a sight.’

Once more there was a silence, then a crackle of paper. The Emperor was again reading Murat’s despatch. Marcellin’s fatigue was getting the upper hand. He heard as in a dream the Emperor’s voice.

‘All this happened on the second of May?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And it is now the fifth? You have not lost much time, Captain Marbot. What are the roads like?’

‘Passable, sir, but the relays very poor.’

‘Tell me of the journey.’

‘I left Madrid in the afternoon, sir, and travelled

as far as Buitrago with Don Francisco and the rest of the royal family. The royal family slept at Buitrago, but it seemed to me, sir, that my best chance of getting through to you was to ride well ahead of the news. It had reached Buitrago, of course, and the country was rising about us. I rode out that same night and thought it wise to get rid of the postilion from Madrid. So about a mile from Buitrago I told him that I had left my purse behind at the inn and sent him back to fetch it, promising a good reward. Then I rode on alone to the next stage. Here they had heard nothing of the massacres. After that it was easy, sir. I rode night and day.'

The Emperor smiled suddenly and Marcellin felt his heart swell.

'You did very well, Captain Marbot.'

He opened again the despatch from Madrid.

'The Grand Duke of Berg states that order has been restored. I trust that he was not sparing with the firing parties.'

Marcellin stood silent. The scenes in Madrid were still vividly before him: brown Spanish faces with lips snarling back; lean hands with flashing knives; women as merciless as the men; the face of a child torn with passion, glaring at him from a hole in the ground and hideously scattered by the flying hoof of a French cavalry charger.

With an effort he pulled himself together.

'If I might venture, sir,' he said to the Emperor, who, with head thrown back, was looking at him thoughtfully, 'the revolt is crushed, but the attitude of the people is menacing. The firing parties were at work when I left Madrid, but there was no despair. The priests were comforting the people and they were not afraid.'

The Emperor's voice cut into his speech.

'The people have been misled. I have no doubt that they will listen to reason.'

He paused a moment as in reflection.

'Captain Marbot,' he said suddenly.

'Sir!'

'Tell the King and Queen of Spain to come to me at once.'

Marcellin brought his heels together. His dolman swayed as he saluted.

'What is that?' said the Emperor as he turned.

'Sir?'

'In your dolman?'

Marcellin lifted the green fur-trimmed cloth and looked at it.

'A thrust, sir. It occurred at the beginning of the action. I hadn't time to change.'

'Thank you, Captain Marbot.'

Marcellin saluted again and walked stiffly down the alley. The sleep he had kept at bay was breaking over him. He reached the end of the alley and turned into the broad walk. Who were the bright wavering figures that moved and chattered yonder? What was it the Emperor had said to him?

'Tell the King and Queen of Spain to come to me at once.'

They stood apart from their suites. The Queen was still talking to the Prince of the Peace. Those were French officers who stood beside the ladies-in-waiting of the Empress. The women fluttered and preened like a flock of brilliantly coloured Eastern birds he had once seen in the Jardin des Plantes.

He walked forward and began to deliver his message. The King had turned to meet him. His enormous belly came round like a small boat on the water, his

face lolled a little to one side.

‘His Imperial Majesty the Emperor,’ said Marcellin bowing low, ‘desires Your Majesty to join him in the alley.’

The King called back to the Queen:

‘You hear that, Luisa?’

He turned to Marcellin.

‘You come from Madrid?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

‘What is the news?’

‘Bad news, Your Majesty.’

The King, in a high-pitched voice, screamed over his shoulder to his son Ferdinand, who stood sullenly apart from the rest.

‘The Emperor has news from Madrid. You had better come.’

Marcellin stood aside and watched the three of them as they began to walk towards the alley. They had hardly gone more than half-way towards the mouth of it, however, when quick steps were heard on the gravel and the Emperor burst from between the dark cypresses. Murat’s despatch was crumpled in his right hand. His face was flushed and his eyes burning. King Charles, catching sight of him, came to a halt, a look of stupid consternation on his face.

The Emperor came straight at them. He lifted his arm in a threatening gesture and shook the despatch in their faces.

‘So this is how you repay my friendship!’ he exclaimed. ‘Blood in the streets of Madrid. Two thousand Frenchmen butchered by your filthy rabble. You call yourself King of Spain. Is this how you rule your country?’

§ 12

All movement had ceased on the terrace. The bright scene stood silent as a picture and Marcellin could hear a watch ticking in the King's pocket. The walls of the château with their pepper-pot turrets, the silver river and the trees of the park made a noble background for the imperial suites, an emphatic flush of bright dresses and coloured uniforms. Duroc himself was on the steps of the terrace in a dark blue coat embroidered with gold and oak leaves. The tassels of his sash shone against his white breeches. These tassels, tapping the top of his black Hessians, were for an instant the only things that moved, except that, far away, tiny figures in blue and white, marching stiffly under their bearskins, showed where a sergeant of the Guard was relieving the sentries.

A little wind sprang up, fluttering the silk dresses of the women, as Napoleon thrust the despatch into the hands of the King of Spain.

Savary came hastily out of a high glass door from the château, and the officers on duty, among them a few civilians, moved forward uncontrollably, urged by a curiosity which overcame even the stiffness of etiquette.

‘Read, Majesty, read!’

The voice of the Emperor rang out. The old King's hands, Marcellin noted, were trembling so much that he could scarcely take the paper. He was holding it apparently upside down, for, as he turned it the right way up, it fell from his grasp and fluttered to the gravel. The tall Godoy stooped to retrieve it simultaneously with the King, so that their heads came into sharp collision. Marcellin bit back a smile. They were like two gorgeous fowl grovelling for grain.

‘What is this, Charles?’

The high voice of Queen Maria Luisa cut in suddenly.

‘Here, let *me* read it.’

She snatched the paper from the King’s hands and, as she read, a dark flush came into her cheeks in harriidan patches.

‘This,’ she exclaimed, ‘is outrageous. It is false news, sir. It cannot be true.’

The Emperor silenced her with a gesture.

‘Do you imagine, madam, that the Grand Duke of Berg is in the habit of sending me false despatches?’

Silence fell again. The old King looked helplessly from his wife to Godoy. The Adam’s apple in his throat was jerking up and down as he swallowed his saliva. Then the Queen raised her hand and pointed at the sullen figure of her eldest son, a few paces to her right. Ferdinand, alone of all the group, had shown no sign of life. He stood motionless, his heavy jaw lying on his stiff embroidered collar, his eyes without lustre beneath the black glossy brows that cut his forehead like an iron bar.

‘This is your doing,’ said the Queen, and her voice took on a higher note. ‘It is all part of your revolting conspiracy.’

She wheeled round and confronted the Emperor, who was standing now with hands clasped behind his back, his jaw thrust forward, watching with keen eyes the quivering royalties of Spain.

‘He is false and cruel, sir,’ she continued. ‘There is no limit to his ambition. He has dragged his parents in the mud. He has the heart of a tiger and the head of a mule.’

The King stood by nodding and shaking his stick.

‘What the Queen says is true. Every word is true. He has conspired against me, sir. He has

overthrown order and good government in Spain. He has brought disorder into my palace. He has set the Royal Guard against my own person. He has made me his prisoner. He has covered my Minister with blood.'

Here the old King laid a trembling hand on Godoy and turned upon Ferdinand.

'Look,' he continued.

He snatched the despatch from the Queen's hand and, stepping forward, forced it upon his son. Ferdinand held the paper and stared brutishly at the sheets. The Emperor had not moved. He still stood in the familiar attitude, his legs well apart and his head thrust forward between his shoulders. The King's voice, cracked with passion, rose to a scream.

'See what you have done,' he went on. 'Blood in the streets of Madrid. French blood and Spanish blood. Do you hope to persuade me that you had no part in this? Was it for this that you and your accomplices pushed me from the throne, to massacre my subjects? Who advised you to this act of carnage? Or did you think it out for yourself?'

Bubbles were bursting along the King's full under lip. He advanced a step, then raised his cane and Marbot thought he was about to strike his son across the face. But the point fell harmless and the stream of words continued.

'Say something, booby. But you know well enough that you've done for yourself this time.'

Queen Maria Luisa thrust herself between them.

'I always said you would be the ruin of us all,' she exclaimed.

She was close to Ferdinand now, her face thrust up into his, her hand uplifted.

'You would have been the death of us all, if we had

remained in Spain. Your own parents. Parricide! Do you deny it? Answer me, damn your stupid face. What, you stand there! You play the Christ before us! But you cannot get out of this by pretending to know nothing.'

She raised her hands as she finished, but Ferdinand bobbed and avoided the cuff.

Marcellin looked beyond them to the court. Of all the figures in the background only Savary moved a muscle, raising his hand to conceal the bitter, satisfied smile which he could not suppress. Napoleon still stood motionless. Marcellin could not see his face, but, as Godoy stepped forward as though to implore Charles to make some show of dignity, Napoleon spoke.

'Prince,' he said, turning slightly towards Ferdinand.

At the sound of his voice they all fell into awkward attitudes of attention.

'My mind was almost made up as the result of the events which brought you to Bayonne. This news confirms it.'

The voice of the Emperor, after the screaming passion of the King and Queen, conveyed a pitiless authority.

'I will never recognise as King of Spain one whom I must hold to account for the murder of French soldiers and who implored me to sanction his unnatural conduct in dethroning his own father. Take care what you say, Prince. You stand on the edge of a precipice.'

He paused and looked at Ferdinand, expecting a reply. The Prince of the Asturias thrust out his heavy chin and moved his under lip, but no words came.

Napoleon turned to the shaking figure of the old King.

'Your Majesty,' he said more gently. 'If you wish it, I will restore you to your throne and accompany you in person to your capital.'

Charles gazed at him a moment in bewilderment and then shook his head with such vigour that the powder on his hair fell in a light cloud on the shoulders of his dirty coat.

'Sir,' he exclaimed. 'I do not wish to go back. What can I do in a country which has been roused to passion against me? I should return to rule by shedding the blood of Spaniards. I should dishonour my old age if I consented.'

His voice broke as he turned with a twinge of pain toward his son. There was not wanting a certain majesty in the gesture of his right hand.

'My son,' he continued, 'do you think it costs nothing to be a king? You have followed the counsels of evil men. You must fend for yourself in future. I will have nothing more to do with you or your affairs.'

Then, at last, Ferdinand spoke.

'I know nothing of this business,' he muttered, shaking the despatch in his right hand.

The Queen snatched it from him.

'It is all your doing,' she screamed, 'and you shall not escape the consequences. Do not imagine that you can keep the crown you stole like a common thief. You may as well shut up shop.'

Napoleon stepped forward and held up his hand.

'There is no more to say,' he said sharply.

He looked straight at Ferdinand.

'If by midnight you have not recognised your father as the lawful King of Spain,' he said, and his voice cut like a knife, 'and have not formally notified this to the

Junta in Madrid, you will be dealt with as a traitor and a rebel. Duroc! Savary!’

The two men stepped forward quickly.

‘Sir,’ said Duroc.

‘You heard what I said?’

They bowed.

‘Keep the Prince under observation until midnight. If he has not spoken by then, summon a court-martial.’

He turned with the ghost of a smile to Charles.

‘When Your Majesty is formally recognised to be King of Spain by the Prince of the Asturias and his advisers,’ he said, ‘we will settle all further matters between ourselves.’

Napoleon turned and walked with rapid steps across the terrace towards the castle.

§ 13

‘... And in exchange for the said Crown and Kingdom of Spain and of the Two Indies, Napoleon, Emperor of the French, hereby guarantees to Charles, formerly King of Spain, and to his lawful spouse, the annual sum of seven and a half million francs, the use of the Château of Chambord, and, in addition, the sum of four hundred thousand francs a year to each of the Infantas.’

‘I think that is all, sir,’ said the voice of Duroc smoothly.

‘Where do I sign?’

‘Here, sir.’

The old King rose painfully from his chair.

‘The Queen should do this for me,’ he muttered.

‘I can scarcely hold the pen. Manuel, you are to witness it.’

‘Ready, sir,’ came the voice of Godoy at his elbow.

There followed the scratching of a quill on paper. Then the old King dropped the pen and moved away from the table.

‘I feel better today,’ he said as Duroc sprinkled the sand. ‘Now, perhaps, they will let a poor old king play peacefully on his fiddle.’

CHAPTER VII

§ 1

HIS SERENE HIGHNESS, Charles Maurice Talleyrand de Périgord, Vice Grand Elector of the Empire, Grand Chamberlain to the Emperor, Prince of Benevento, looked sidelong through the window which gave on to the grounds surrounding his domain of Valençay. On his desk lay a pile of papers which the Paris courier had brought him half an hour ago and which his secretary, Osmond, had set before him. But his mind was on a letter which he held in his right hand.

Today was the nineteenth of June, but the letter in his hand was of May the ninth. Letters from the Emperor, now that he was no longer Minister of External Relations and the fool Champagny sat at his table in the Rue du Bac, were few. Not all of them were pleasant and this time the Emperor had surpassed himself.

Talleyrand sat back in his chair. His eyes wandered from the park, in which a few pedigree cattle were grazing in the far distance, and fell upon the crumpled sheet. The staccato phrases stung again:

The Prince of the Asturias, the Infante Don Antonio his uncle, the Infante Don Carlos his brother, leave here on Wednesday. They will spend Friday and Saturday at Bordeaux. On Tuesday they will be at Valençay. You will accordingly be there by the evening of Monday.

Duly he had waited. He had waited through three long summer weeks. Now, at last, they were to arrive and might be expected any minute. Their intendant, a ridiculous man wearing a wide Spanish coat and a stiff black moustache, had announced them that morning at daybreak.

I desire that the Princes be received without extravagance but decently, and that you do what you can to amuse them. . . . Bring Madame de Talleyrand and three or four other women with her. It would be all to the good if the Prince of the Asturias should become attached to a pretty woman. It will make it all the more easy for you to keep an eye on him.

Talleyrand picked up the letter, refolded it in the creases that were becoming worn by use and slipped it into the pocket of his embroidered coat.

So he was to keep house—and what sort of house?—for the Prince of the Asturias, with Madame de Talleyrand to assist in providing him with suitable female companionship.

All France would be looking to see how Monsieur de Talleyrand would take it. Was the Emperor nursing perhaps a sense of comedy? There was an oafish mockery in this order to hold fast and amuse the royal princes of Spain. He had advised the Emperor to destroy them. Not very good advice, but he had long ago given up advising the Emperor for his good. Good counsel brought only reproof and bitterness. He had urged the Emperor to embark upon this Spanish business, knowing it was the advice which the Emperor wished to receive. Here was the sequel.

Let the smile go round. He would refuse to see it.

He rose impatiently. Catherine would be waiting in the gallery or perhaps in the Empire drawing-room. His eyes travelled up the wall. Above the door gleamed his new coat of arms: *Parti en premier de*

gueules, aux trois lions rampans et couronnés d'or; au deuxième d'or, un sanglier passant de sable chargé sur le dos d'une housse d'argent. Chef d'azur à l'aigle d'or, les ailes étendues, empiétant un foudre de même.

He considered that golden eagle trampling the lightning. For the last seven years it had meant something. Now it was a sham, like the gorgeous coat he wore, red velvet heavily embroidered with gold, especially round the wide sleeves where the oak-leaf pattern ran from wrist to shoulder.

He turned his head from the blazoned shield and resumed his progress towards the door. Montrond stood on the threshold. He held the Prince's hat in his hand, an uncomfortable affair of black felt turned up in front with a huge panache of white plumes.

Talleyrand raised his eyebrows.

'They have arrived?' he asked.

Montrond shook his head.

'Not yet. But I thought you would like to walk through the rooms and see that everything is in order. The Princess is waiting in the gallery.'

Talleyrand, slipping his arm into that of his friend, moved slowly through the door leaning on his cane.

They entered a long vestibule. The high lights on the furniture shone from polished wood and gleaming gold. At the end of the vestibule a tall man in some kind of uniform was standing and there came a jingle of spurs as the officer brought his heels smartly together.

Talleyrand turned to Montrond.

'It is Henri,' his friend explained, 'commanding a detachment of the Gendarmerie d'Élite.'

Talleyrand came limping forward. If he were jailer to the Princes, this was the turnkey. He surveyed the man carefully from his black Hessians upwards, noting the blue uniform that fitted perfectly,

the shining helmet cocked under the left arm, the red face crowning the whole.

'Colonel Henri,' said this figure, introducing itself with a bow, 'at your Serene Highness's command.'

Talleyrand did not offer his hand, but bowed a trifle stiffly in return.

'Colonel Henri,' he repeated gently and waited for further light on the subject.

'Of the Gendarmerie d'Elite. I have two detachments of fifty men. They are ready and waiting.'

Talleyrand's hand went to his lace cravat.

'Ready, I trust, to receive their Royal Highnesses in the manner becoming to their rank,' he said.

'Certainly, Highness. All my arrangements are made. We shall keep an eye upon them, never fear.'

Talleyrand inspected him quietly.

'I was under the impression, Colonel, that their Royal Highnesses were my guests. Do you, may I ask, regard them as your prisoners?'

'Emperor's orders, Highness,' answered the Colonel shortly, and Talleyrand noted a look of satisfaction in his stupid blue eyes.

Talleyrand turned to Montrond.

'Have we received any precise instructions from His Imperial Majesty on this point?'

Montrond shook his head.

'None whatever.'

'In that case, Colonel, this being my house, you will take your orders from me,' said Talleyrand.

'The Emperor . . .' began the Colonel.

'This is my house, Colonel,' interrupted Talleyrand.

'I regret, Highness, but I am personally responsible for the safety of the Princes.'

There was a moment's silence.

Talleyrand turned to his friend.

'Montrond,' he said, 'what arrangements have we made for their Royal Highnesses to take exercise?'

Montrond smiled.

'The south wood,' he said, 'is finely provided with trees and for shelter there is the Italian summer-house.'

'Is there a wall?' enquired Colonel Henri, very red in the face.

Talleyrand raised his right eyebrow.

'The estate,' he said, 'is suitably enclosed.'

'But the south wood, Highness,' persisted the Colonel. 'Is there a wall?'

The Colonel's chin was thrust out. Talleyrand smiled.

'Montrond,' he said, 'please be good enough to give immediate orders for a wall.'

Talleyrand looked back at the Colonel.

'There will be a door in the wall,' he said. 'And the key of it will be in my possession. Is that understood? Your men . . .'

'My men have orders to accompany the Princes whenever they take exercise in the park.'

'Your men, Colonel, will remain *outside* the wall. That is its purpose.'

Talleyrand, leaning a trifle more heavily on his friend's arm, moved away. Together they passed through the door at the end of the vestibule into the gallery. The statues gleamed white in niches on either side, and Talleyrand, glancing up, caught the cold stony gaze of a Medusa head. The evening light was streaming into the gallery and through the oblong windows drifted a scent of thyme and myrtle. From somewhere far off came the cry of a waggoner, bringing

with it a swift vision of oxen straining at a load of early summer hay.

Soon the last of the Bourbons would be here, drinking his wine, eating his food, commanding his servants, resenting their captivity.

‘Ah, there you are, my dear Charles. I thought you were never coming.’

Quick footsteps and a rustle of skirts announced the presence of his wife. She waited for him in a shaft of sunlight. She was wearing, he noted, a tight-fitting tunic of white taffeta, trimmed with a fringe of pink silk. From a short way below her breasts a skirt of white crêpe fell, striped with white satin ribbon, the hem elaborately embroidered with silver laurel leaves. The short sleeves, puffing above the elbow, were of white crêpe sewn with spangles and secured with a bracelet of artificial larkspur which also girdled her waist. He considered her critically. The beauty which had captivated him years ago was still there, but it was harsh and faded beneath the paint. Catherine was getting stout.

She turned upon him her bright blue eyes.

‘All these preparations,’ she exclaimed, clutching at her husband’s arm. ‘I do hope everything is all right.’

Talleyrand smiled.

‘I am sure of it, my dear.’

As he spoke a file of lackeys entered wearing liveries in the Spanish colours of red and yellow.

‘I have had a red and yellow flag broken from the keep,’ continued Catherine in her husband’s ear.

A wizened little man, in leather breeches and a homespun cut-away coat, came forward.

Talleyrand beckoned to him.

‘Aubry,’ he said, ‘there will be good hunting, I

trust, for our distinguished visitors.'

The old gamekeeper smiled and nodded at his master.

'And good company,' added Madame de Talleyrand rapidly. 'There are the two Mesdames de Bellegarde . . .'

'Two?' murmured Talleyrand.

'Wife and sister-in-law of that Austrian Field Marshal. Don't you remember, Charles? Something to do with a peace treaty.'

Talleyrand nodded gravely.

'There is also the Duchess of Genoa and Madame de Brignole,' pursued Catherine. 'So we shan't be at all monastic.'

Talleyrand smiled.

'I am told that the Prince of the Asturias is bringing his private chaplain,' he said. 'His Royal Highness, it seems, is of a pious habit.'

Catherine knit her brows in a worried effort at concentration.

'A canon of Toledo,' she said, 'but I cannot remember his name.'

'Escoiquiz,' put in Montrond.

'We should perhaps have evening prayers together,' suggested Catherine.

'An excellent arrangement,' said Talleyrand.

The sound of a horn near at hand came through the open window. Talleyrand, with his wife in full sail behind him, moved towards the door. Together they descended the steps which led to the court of honour.

All other sounds were lost in the word of command.

'Present . . . arms!'

A coach, white with dust and drawn by six sweating horses, lumbered into the courtyard. It drew up opposite Talleyrand with a grinding of wheels and a

creaking of harness. A young man with a long nose and heavy lips leaned forward, as a lackey made haste to open the coach door and pull down the folding steps.

‘I am deeply honoured,’ began Talleyrand, bowing low as the Prince of the Asturias emerged from the heavy coach and stood blinking in the sunlight.

§ 2

‘His Excellency, the Minister Fouché.’

Marie Walewska looked up as her visitor entered. What was his business? What could be his reason for asking to see her informally and alone? The question had been running in her mind ever since, with her breakfast chocolate, she had received his message.

She rose to receive him. Fouché was no longer magnificent, as she had seen him last at the court ball, but dressed plainly, severely almost, in grey cloth with a yellow waistcoat. His plain clothes, however, did not make him more accessible. He bent over her hand. Shrinking from the touch of his lips, she was surprised to find them blood warm.

‘A cup of chocolate?’ she suggested and reached for the silver jug.

Fouché bowed.

‘With pleasure, madam,’ he said.

‘Or would you prefer a glass of wine?’

She indicated a decanter on a little mahogany table supported by four sphinxes in bronze that stood beside her chair.

Fouché shook his head.

‘Chocolate, madam.’

She poured him out a cup. He bent over her hand to take it and again she drew back.

Fouché returned to his chair and drank. His gestures with the cup were awkward and his fingers were thick and blunt. Yet, in his sober habit, with the clean lace at his wrists and the grave shaven face showing traces of powder, he would pass for a man of race.

‘I am happy to see you so well installed,’ he said.

She followed his glance as it went round the room, noting the walls partly panelled and partly covered with blue silk, the ceiling frescoed with a design of Europa on the Bull, surrounded by cupids and other mythological deities, the high cornice, freshly gilded, immediately beneath the ceiling and the Aubusson carpet, blue like the walls and covered with a pattern of large flowers.

Her glance returned to the Minister, who had now set down his empty cup.

‘Monsieur Fouché,’ she said, and she was pleased to note that her voice was under control, ‘you are a busy man and I do not imagine that you came here to talk about my house.’

Fouché bowed.

‘You are right, madam,’ he answered. ‘I came on a more important matter.’

She waited.

‘I am, as you are aware, Minister of Police,’ Fouché continued.

Walewska blenched.

‘You have something to tell me,’ she said. ‘The Emperor . . . he is safe and well?’

‘The Emperor, madam, is setting out on a progress from Bayonne through the southernmost part of his dominions. According to my latest reports, which I received at noon today, His Majesty is in excellent health and spirits.’

She relaxed in the stiff brocaded chair and, again, she waited.

'You will forgive me, madam,' Fouché continued, 'but in my position, as one of the Emperor's confidential Ministers, it is sometimes necessary for me to speak frankly to the friends of His Majesty. To you I may freely open my mind. You occupy a very special position. It would be foolish of me to ignore it.'

He paused a moment and then added gravely.

'We are both servants of the Emperor, madam, and loyal servants should have no secrets from one another.'

She looked him in the face. What did he want of her?

Fouché sat back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together.

'His Imperial Majesty went to Bayonne last month to settle the affairs of Spain.'

She nodded.

Fouché was silent a moment, gazing over the top of her head as though he were wholly concerned with appreciating the beauties or defects of a large landscape by Nicolas Poussin. So intently did he stare that she could scarcely resist an impulse to turn and gaze at the picture.

'Are you aware, madam, that at the first rumour of this Spanish visit the funds began to fall? That was as long ago as March last. You were then on the road to Paris.'

She suppressed a retort. No one knew better than Fouché the state of the public funds, with the possible exception of Talleyrand, and the knowledge was notoriously of profit to them both.

'The fall in the funds,' pursued Fouché, 'was partly due to the distrust of the investing public in further military adventures. But that was not the only

or even the principal reason. The fall was chiefly due to a fear that haunts every good servant of the Emperor whenever he exposes himself to the chances of war.'

She drew a sharp breath. Fouché, his eyes still bent on the picture behind her head, did not seem to be aware of the effect of his words.

'Should anything happen to His Imperial Majesty,' continued Fouché, 'the Empire would scarcely survive him, unless'—here he turned suddenly and looked straight at Marie—'unless someone were ready to bring forward at once an eligible successor.'

Fouché stopped.

'But what has this to do with me?' she found herself saying.

'The only true successor,' pursued Fouché, 'would be an heir of the Emperor's body.'

She flushed. She was both angry and afraid. How did he dare to come so near to her thought?

Fouché bent forward.

'Let me tell you what is in my mind. There must cease to be for His Majesty's enemies so high a premium on his death. I have not reached this conviction lightly and I have already taken steps. My enemies or my friends—I sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between them—will tell you of a visit which I paid last summer to the Empress at Fontainebleau.'

'You have spoken to the Empress?'

Fouché nodded.

'I begged her most solemnly, for the sake of the Emperor and of his dynasty, to join with the Senate in asking him to take another wife.'

She looked at him in amazement, seeking a motive for this audacity.

‘Do you tell me, Monsieur Fouché, that you asked the Empress to suggest her own dismissal?’

‘For the public good, madam.’

She smiled.

‘I should like to have been present at that interview, Monsieur Fouché,’ she said.

‘Madam has perhaps a liking for comedy.’

‘But not for farce,’ she retorted. ‘So perhaps, after all, it was well that I missed the performance. An appeal from heart to heart in such circumstances must have made a striking scene.’

Fouché stared at the cupids on the ceiling. She hoped, but could not be sure, that she had disconcerted him. She added, pressing her advantage:

‘And what had the Emperor to say about it?’

‘The Emperor was not amused. But a good servant must often displease his master.’

‘I thought, Monsieur Fouché, that you were a friend of the Empress.’

‘I am still her friend and I am only sorry that she did not take my advice. For Josephine’—his tone became suddenly hard and familiar—‘must go. It is only a question of time. I know the people of France. That is my business. They desire above all things to see a son of the Emperor playing on the steps of the throne.’

He paused.

‘Permit me to tell you of an incident that took place not so very long ago. It concerns the little Achille Murat. He is a pretty child, some two or three years old. He was walking with his nursemaid in the streets of Paris and his progress raised a general sigh from the good citizens who saw him, until one exclaimed: “If only he were the son of our Emperor, we would kiss his little boots.”’

She gripped the arm of her chair. Her eye was on the hand of Fouché raised to give point to his story, a coarse hand twitching at her secrets. A keen desire for Napoleon gripped her.

The voice continued.

‘Why should the Emperor hesitate? He knows that the Empress can bear no more children and it is not love for her that holds him back. Is it, perhaps, that he fears to discover in himself the withered branch?’

She rose to her feet. This was plain speaking with a vengeance. Fouché rose too, not moved, but in mere politeness.

‘Madam, the Emperor must have an heir. He must settle down. We must set a limit to his adventures.’

‘Why do you come to me?’

She had not meant to say that. She had turned her back on Fouché and was walking across the room. Fouché waited till she turned.

‘Hear me out, please,’ he said. ‘Then I will answer your question, though I think you know the answer. There is a good father lost in the Emperor, madam.’

She came towards him. Was the man sincere? The thin mask seemed to her fancy about to break. She remembered vague tales of his happy family life.

Fouché answered her thoughts.

‘*Non semper tendit arcum Apollo,*’ he said with a quiet smile.

She stared at him harder, struggling with the thought he had put into her mind.

‘If the Emperor’s hearth were bright at home,’ he continued conveying it back to her in high phrase, ‘he would no longer be driven to warm himself at camp

fires lit in the four corners of Europe. Who better than yourself, madam, could perform that office?'

'What you suggest is impossible,' she protested.

'The Emperor has created a world where everything is possible. I will tell you all that is in my mind. Is the Emperor to seek a wife among the royal houses of Europe? Such a marriage would leave him still unsatisfied and drive him to new policies. Or is he to look nearer home and marry as his heart suggests? He would wish to leave to a son by the woman he loved a safe inheritance. He would find it in this great estate of France and cease to wish for things which could not possibly survive him.'

Fouché paused suddenly.

'That, madam, is all I have to say and, if I have moved you to consider it, I am more than satisfied.'

He bowed rapidly and, turning from her with an awkward gesture, walked quickly from the room.

She stood a moment looking after him and then moved to one of the tall windows. The afternoon was warm and quick with the noises of the city.

From somewhere the notes of a trumpet rang out as the soldiers of the Emperor moved to the Tuileries for the changing of the Guard.

§ 3

Catherine de Talleyrand took her seat at the foot of the long dining-room table. This, she felt, was undoubtedly a great occasion. Marriage with Talleyrand six years previously had not, so far, achieved all that she had hoped of it. People had an odd habit of ignoring what she said or of listening with strained attention and then retiring into a corner to smile and whisper. The Emperor had always, of course, been

very kind. Had he not himself insisted that Charles should make an honest woman of her and made it plain that she was for all social purposes a most respectable lady? Yet somehow she had always felt that her position was not quite satisfactory. That was what came of marrying a bishop, though Charles, of course, was a bishop no longer. The Pope had released him from that entanglement. But people were so malicious and she could never be quite sure, even now, that she was not, as her poor dear confessor would say, a concubine.

There were times when she almost regretted the days when she had been plain Madame Grand. But now she was a princess, and a princess could not hope to get much fun out of life. It was the penalty of greatness and she had always wished to be great. She would not have had it otherwise, though it had meant exchanging an ardent and familiar lover for a very courteous but utterly incomprehensible husband. Charles, in fact, had become almost a stranger. He no longer laughed at her for one thing. She had never known why he laughed, but it had been pleasant to feel that she was able to amuse him.

‘I may not laugh at the Countess de Périgord,’ he had said very gravely and sweetly when she had asked him why he had become so serious of late.

Men presumably did not laugh at their wives. Nor, apparently, did they burn for them—again it was the word of her confessor. Yet she was still, she knew, a beautiful woman and the flowing modes of Leroy suited her. A new gown, cut a little fuller than was perhaps strictly the fashion, softened the imperfections of her figure. She had even caught Prince Ferdinand looking at her from beneath his glossy eyebrows and it went to her heart to give him so little encouragement to

look again. But she must remember now her great position. At her table sat two princes of the royal blood, the sons of His Most Catholic Majesty, lately dethroned, it was true, but blood was thicker than water. There, too, was their uncle, a very grave and reverend gentleman. Even the spiteful Madame de Remusat or that quite intolerable Madame Junot would have to acknowledge that she had at last achieved distinction. Her sole misgiving was that Charles did not seem to appreciate these honours as she did.

She examined the table complacently. Everything was in order. High on the stone walls between the windows hung the Spanish royal coat of arms. The table gleamed with silver plate, for this, of course, was only a luncheon. At dinner the plate would be of silver gilt.

The July sun, pouring through the open windows, picked out the lackeys in their Spanish liveries. It was very pleasant to be mistress of a great castle, with royalty in residence, and she had never obeyed Charles more willingly than when he had enjoined her strictly to be most careful of the etiquette. He himself knew so much about that kind of thing and he had even gone to the trouble of writing it all down for her in his quite indecipherable hand. Upon her right sat Don Ferdinando, upon her left Don Carlos, whilst Don Antonio, their uncle, sat on the right hand of Charles. Madame de Brignole and the two Mesdames de Bellegarde were in the middle of the table with Montrond, Sainte Foye and the Secretary Osmond.

Madame de Brignole, of course, was there for a purpose. The Prince of the Asturias must be amused and the de Brignole was baggage enough for that.

Charles himself was carving the baked meats, as befitted a host who had been born under Louis XV.

Behind him stood an array of lackeys with the plates. At the request of Don Carlos they were having a French menu, for he had said that he was tired of Spanish dishes and his elder brother had for once agreed with him. This was just as well, thought Catherine, for the heavy Spanish fare was not to her taste and it was bad for her figure, though Boucher served it remarkably well and old Don Antonio had declared him more capable of preparing the dishes of his country than any Spanish cook.

Charles had risen to his feet, knife and fork in hand. Before him was a large joint of beef, rather a dull dish, thought Catherine privately, but the Princes had insisted on something really solid at every meal and she understood that Boucher's new sauce would be a revelation.

'His Royal Highness,' said Talleyrand, 'will he do me the honour to accept a slice of this beef?'

Ferdinand nodded without speaking. There was, Catherine noted, a splash of sauce adhering to his chin from the last course.

Don Carlos on her left was more polite.

'Thank you, Monseigneur,' he was saying in answer to his host's request delivered in the same formal language, 'there's nothing I should like better.'

The powdered footmen moved round the table, bearing plates of beef for the Princes.

Talleyrand glanced at the Duchess of Genoa, seated opposite Madame de Brignole.

'Madame la duchesse, may I have the honour of cutting you some beef?'

The Duchess, still slim and beautiful, reflected Catherine, though she must be as old as I am, if not older, inclined her head.

Talleyrand sliced with dexterity. His eye travelled

once more round the table. It fell on the elderly Madame de Bellegarde.

'Madame la marquise,' he said, 'may I give you some beef?'

The old lady inclined her head. Charles proceeded with his task.

'My dear Count,' he said, addressing Montrond, 'have some beef?'

In like fashion he addressed and served Madame de Brignole and the younger Madame de Bellegarde. Finally he shot a brief glance at Osmond, his secretary.

'Beef, Monsieur?' said Talleyrand.

So all were served according to their rank, and Catherine sat back smiling upon them and playing with the mushroom omelette in front of her.

Beef was not for her or Leroy would be vexed.

'And how does Your Royal Highness propose to spend the afternoon?' she enquired conversationally of Ferdinand.

Ferdinand, with his mouth full, said nothing, but hunched his shoulders with indifference. Undoubtedly he was difficult, but the young man was naturally in poor spirits. He had hoped to be King of Spain, but the Emperor, who could never leave anybody alone, had sent him packing.

She reflected with awe upon the tragical fall of princes.

§ 4

Casimir de Montrond started up, opened his eyes and looked resentfully for the cause of his disturbance.

'Well,' he said, 'what is it?'

The footman at his elbow bowed.

'Sir,' he said, 'a postilion has just arrived.'

Montrond yawned.

'Why do you wake me up to tell me that?' he asked.

He stretched his legs and looked about him. The drawing-room was empty, as when he had fallen asleep. The afternoon was hot and a short sleep after luncheon was good for the health, so his doctor had maintained. Not for the first time Montrond wondered whether his doctor was right. There was a bad taste in his mouth and he was clammy with sweat, though the room was cool, for a footman had lowered the blinds.

A shaft of sunlight caught one of the lustres of the great cut-glass chandelier hanging from the ceiling and picked out the harp of Catherine de Talleyrand which glittered at him archly from the opposite corner.

'The postilion is wearing the livery of the Grand Duchess of Berg,' continued the footman respectfully.

Montrond yawned again.

'No longer the Grand Duchess of Berg,' he said. 'The news is scarcely public, but the Grand Duchess is now Queen of Naples.'

'The postilion has an urgent message for His Serene Highness,' persisted the footman.

'Then bring him to me.'

Montrond got heavily down from the stiff settee as the door opened and a man in green and buff, with black frogs to his coat, came forward into the shaded room. The man was dusty, and the dust, Montrond noted, made a fine pattern round his puckered eyes.

'Your Serene Highness,' the man began.

Montrond made a gesture.

'His Serene Highness,' he said, 'is still asleep.'

'Pardon me, sir, but I have a message for his Serene Highness. I am to say that Her Majesty the Queen of Naples will be passing by Valençay in half an hour. She requests his Serene Highness, the

Prince of Benevento, to be good enough to meet her at some convenient spot upon the road. Her Majesty is anxious to have some conversation with his Serene Highness.'

The man appeared to have learned his message by heart. Montrond nodded.

'I will inform his Serene Highness,' he answered.

Turning to the footman, he added:

'Jacques, get this man some wine.'

He passed down the white-and-gold room. Through the windows, as he went, he caught, between the arches of the cloisters, the brilliant splash of a fountain in the inner court.

He tapped on a white-and-gold door. There was no answer, and presently he entered.

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, in his silk shirt and breeches, was lying on a high bed of yellow damask. Montrond looked down at him with affection. He could claim to know his friend better than most. But would any man ever really know this chameleon? He lay now defenceless to observation, but there was a seal upon his face. The upper lip, firm and budded like that of a cat, kept its own counsel and the lower lip, though it was full and sensitive, conveyed a courteous contempt for any weakness which its owner might encourage. The tilted nose gave him the air of a questing hound, but so vulgar a comparison was checked by the fine high forehead from which the hair receded as though to give full room for its dignity.

Montrond moved forward towards the marble mantelpiece, whence he continued to look upon his friend, breathing easily in a deep sleep. His eye rested a moment with compassion upon the misshapen right foot clearly showing against the yellow silk.

Then, as Talleyrand did not stir, Montrond struck

his hand lightly against the wooden foot of the bed, which was elaborately carved and bore a medallion showing Louis XIII of France consecrating his country to the service of Our Lady.

Talleyrand opened his eyes.

'What is it, Casimir?'

The face did not change from sleeping to waking. Slipping smoothly into consciousness, Talleyrand was master of himself.

'Sorry to wake you, Charles, but Caroline Murat has sent a courier to say that she is passing by and would like to see you.'

Talleyrand raised his eyebrows.

'Is it a formal visit?'

'The Grand Duchess of Berg that was and the Queen of Spain as she hoped to be would hardly wish to meet our royal guests. She asks you to wait for her at some point conveniently upon the road, an accidental encounter.'

'Where is the courier?'

'Still sober, perhaps, but he had a thirsty look.'

Talleyrand put his feet to the floor.

'We will go together, Casimir.'

He pulled a bell-rope as he spoke and, a moment later, his valet stood in the doorway.

'My coat, Courtiade,' said Talleyrand.

He turned back to Montrond.

'In half an hour, did you say?'

'Twenty minutes now.'

'Send back the courier,' said Talleyrand. 'Let him announce that an accident has been arranged.'

Montrond turned to go, but Talleyrand put a hand on his arm.

'A verbal message, Casimir.'

Casimir smiled and nodded.

§ 5

Talleyrand, leaning on the arm of his friend, walked slowly past the new stone wall bordering the high road. From the keep of Valençay the red and yellow flag of Spain drooped from the pole. There was no air to lift it and no screen upon the road. Talleyrand, seemingly indifferent to the heat, though from time to time he raised his handkerchief to his forehead, limped steadily forward.

They turned a corner of the wall. Below them to the left the brown roofs of the village shone in the afternoon sun. Talleyrand pointed to a great chestnut. Its boughs, heavy with leaves, were spread over the wall, casting a shade.

‘We will wait there,’ he said.

Montrond nodded without speaking.

They had barely reached the chestnut when a sound of hoof-beats became audible and above them rang the note of a horn. Round a bend in the road a coach appeared, drawn by six horses at a smart trot. The postilion on the near side leader was grey with dust, but the coachman still contrived to look fine in his new livery.

Talleyrand smiled.

‘Soon there will be royal crowns on his coat,’ he said.

He released Montrond’s arm and shifted his silver topped stick from his left to his right hand. Montrond made a sign as the coach drew abreast. Almost before the driver had pulled up, and before the footman at the back had time to jump from his box, the door opened and a woman breasted the high space between the floor of the coach and the dusty road.

Montrond hastened forward and caught her arm.

Caroline Murat raised a flushed face.

‘Drive on for a hundred yards,’ she said over her shoulder to the coachman.

‘Very good, Majesty.’

Montrond still waited beside her, but she paid no heed and, with an abrupt movement, advanced upon Talleyrand.

He straightened up from his bow as she reached him.

‘This is good of you, Talleyrand. You must forgive me for bringing you here; but, as you may imagine, I did not wish to see the Princes nor’—here she glanced at Montrond—‘is it necessary that my Imperial brother should know of this meeting.’

‘You need have nothing to fear on the point of discretion,’ responded Talleyrand. ‘Casimir and I,’—here the full lips smiled gently—‘have no secrets from one another.’

Caroline turned to Montrond and remembered to be gracious.

‘It is always maintained that you are inseparable,’ she said. ‘It is even hinted, Monsieur de Montrond, that you love your friend too much.’

‘Who could help it?’ responded Montrond. ‘He is so delightfully vicious.’

Caroline laughed and touched the two men playfully on the shoulders.

‘I have fallen among friends,’ she said.

‘Majesty,’ began Talleyrand.

‘Enough of that,’ broke in Caroline. ‘I accept the title from my lackeys. From you it is a mockery. I did not ask to be Queen of Naples.’

Talleyrand bowed.

‘I cannot, madam, be expected to deplore the event, since it brings you to Valençay.’

'I am on the way to Barèges,' responded Caroline.
'Joachim is taking the waters.'

'Your husband is indisposed?'

'He needs time to recover.'

'To recover, madam?'

'From his disappointment.'

Caroline flicked impatiently at her skirt.

'You and I, Talleyrand, are in the same case,' she added bluntly. 'We have done much for the Emperor. You have been his Minister of External Relations for seven years, but I find you here in attendance on the Spanish Princes. Joachim is the best leader of cavalry in the Grand Army and he was the Emperor's regent in Spain. But he is sent away to Naples and we must content ourselves with the leavings of brother Joseph, who is the fool of the family.'

Talleyrand gave a hardly perceptible shrug.

'For myself, madam, I can hardly complain. Valençay is a considerable property. His Imperial Majesty has bettered my estate and, in counting my blessings, it would be unbecoming of me not to remember that even in this hour of my retreat I have the honour to be Arch-Chancellor of the Empire and His Serene Highness the Prince of Benevento.'

'Prince of Fiddlesticks,' returned Caroline briskly.

Talleyrand smiled.

'You would have me remember the words of the poet: *Je vois mes honneurs croître et tomber mon crédit.*'

'Apt as usual, Talleyrand. Your Serene Highness, like my poor Joachim, is on the shelf and will remain there till the Emperor takes you down again. You cut as pretty a figure here as I shall, queening it in Naples, over a thousand miles from Paris.'

'The comparison, I fear, madam, is not to my advantage. Your Majesty is called upon to reign in

the hearts of six million of her loyal subjects. Six million is, I believe, the correct figure, if Sicily be included.'

Caroline drew herself up and assumed a heavy majesty. Montrond smiled to himself. The famous complexion was now more rose than milk. But she looked handsome enough in a full-blown southern fashion. He wondered how Murat enjoyed himself with her.

'You are pleased to trifle with me, Prince. The Emperor, since Tilsit, thinks he is lord of the world. But, with England still on the map, he cannot play fast and loose with his best supporters.'

Talleyrand shook his head gravely.

'I do not question your reading of events, madam. But why do you come out of your way to see the jailor of Princes? I should have thought Champagne would have better served your turn.'

'Champagne is a fool and a cipher.'

'Still, he is Minister of External Relations.'

'And Joseph is King of Spain. There should be some sympathy between us.'

Talleyrand shook his head.

'Spain, dear lady, is not perhaps the easiest of all countries to rule. Your husband is perhaps to be congratulated.'

He paused a moment and added, looking intently at Caroline as he spoke.

'We can only hope, as loyal subjects, that the Emperor will be as easily quit of his responsibilities.'

Caroline looked up with a quickened interest.

'You think there is danger in Spain?'

Talleyrand seemed sunk in meditation. With his stick he began tracing figures in the dust.

'I think that the Emperor, in enticing the Spanish

Princes to Bayonne, has made a very serious mistake. His conduct seems to be like that of a man of the world who commits every kind of folly. He keeps mistresses, he is unkind to his wife, he does injury even to his intimate friends. For that, everyone blames him. Yet, because he is able and rich and strong, society continues to grant him every indulgence. But the moment that man is caught cheating at cards, he is finished. Do I make myself clear?'

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the dry scraping of the grasshoppers in the fields on the further side of the road.

Caroline was puzzled. Talleyrand had seemed suddenly to show his hand and she was lost for an answer.

'And so, my dear lady,' he continued softly, 'I am content to wait. Events should be permitted to approach us. One should never go to meet them.'

Caroline moved impatiently.

'Patience was never one of my virtues. With you, my friend, I think it has become almost a vice.'

Talleyrand smiled again.

'I think that perhaps the Emperor may soon have need of me and I shall not forget that his sister has done me the honour to open her mind thus frankly.'

As he spoke the twanging sound of guitars became audible a short distance away in the wooded park beyond the wall. Caroline lifted her head. The music, oddly out of place in the heart of France, brought a grimace to the expressive countenance of Montrond.

'That is Castro,' said Talleyrand. 'He is playing a bolero, accompanying the Princes on their afternoon walk.'

Another sound came to Montrond's ears. It was

that of a horse moving at a gallop. Caroline looked about her uneasily.

‘I must not be seen talking to you here,’ she said.

‘Montrond,’ said Talleyrand, ‘if that is the courier from Paris, stop him and take his letters.’

Montrond left the shade of the chestnut and stepped into the glare of the road. He reached the bend just as the horseman, dusty to the eyes, swung round it. Montrond recognised his livery and held up a hand. The courier pulled his beast to a halt and, reaching at a saddle-bag, handed Montrond a leather portfolio.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said, ‘that will save me from going to the house.’

‘Anything special, Jean?’

The courier nodded.

‘Great news,’ he said. ‘There has been a victory in Spain.’

Montrond walked back to the chestnut tree, whilst the courier turned his horse and walked it slowly across the fields towards the back entrance of the stables.

‘The courier says there is news,’ said Montrond, opening the portfolio as he reached Caroline and Talleyrand. ‘Something has happened in Spain.’

Talleyrand pulled out a letter of which he broke the seal. He read the contents and nodded.

‘News, indeed,’ he said quietly. ‘Bessières has won a victory over Cuesta and Blake at Medina del Rio Seco. The way of your brother Joseph to Madrid lies open, dear lady.’

Caroline flushed angrily.

‘You see, Talleyrand, Spain is less difficult than you imagined.’

Talleyrand smiled again.

‘I never doubted that Joseph would reach Madrid.

But I am tempted to wonder,' he added, tilting his head and looking up into the cool green of the chestnut tree, 'just how much it will cost to keep him there.'

Caroline moved towards the waiting coach.

'This meeting has not been wasted,' she said. 'I know at least that you think the Emperor has made a mistake.'

Talleyrand bowed.

'And I,' he added, 'know that you are not content to be Queen of Naples. Meanwhile I hope that Your Majesty will be pleased to regard me as one of the six million.'

Caroline, from the steps of the coach, looked at him in momentary bewilderment.

'Six million?' she echoed.

Talleyrand bowed yet lower.

'One among the six million of Your Majesty's most loyal subjects,' he concluded.

CHAPTER VIII

§ I

MARIE WALEWSKA, leaning from the edge of the carriage, showed him a bank, sloping upwards from a marshy stream and ending in a row of poplars. The trees stood in the sad fashion of their kind, their high tops moving in a breeze which carried with it a tang of the sea. The stream ran through a wide meadow, the grass of which was already beginning to grow again after the hay harvest gathered a month before. Serenely, to the left of the road, the Loire waited to receive the stream. The sky was blue and the country green with woods, broken now and then by the white walls of a farm-house.

‘Over there,’ she said, smiling up at him on his horse.

The day was hot and the back of the carriage had been thrown open. She wore a light organdie frock and a straw bonnet turned up at one side and trimmed with a small bunch of blue feathers. Over her shoulders was spread a blue Indian shawl.

Felix touched his horse and moved forward to where Joachim sat on the box, his eyes puckered in the sunlight and his knotted hands firm on the reins.

‘Madam will lunch here by the stream,’ Felix said.

Joachim turned a face, gone sulky, towards his mistress.

‘Here?’ he questioned doubtfully.

‘Here,’ repeated Felix shortly.

Joachim, as he knew, liked the comfort of inns and the wine of the country to which he had been too steadily inclined since they had set out from Paris. His eyes, Felix noted, were slightly bloodshot. Walewska said a word to him in Polish, at once soft and incisive. Joachim inclined his head and drew rein, calling out in his turn to Vladislaw, who was acting as postilion.

‘Bait the horses at the stream,’ said Felix, dismounting as he spoke. ‘We start again in an hour.’

He threw the reins of his mare to Vladislaw who, bow-legged, came paddling up in the dust like a duck. Felix pulled open the door of the carriage himself and let down the steps.

‘Under the poplars, Monsieur Felix. But tell me, did the man at Ancenis really promise us a lark pie?’

‘He did, madam.’

She stepped from the roadway to the grass beyond.

‘Come along,’ she said. ‘Joachim will give you the basket.’

Joachim was already busy, and the horses, freed from harness, their heads stretched eagerly toward the stream, were being led away by Vladislaw.

She moved across the meadow and sat down under one of the poplars. Felix took the basket from Joachim.

‘Help Vladislaw with the horses,’ he said. ‘I can manage this alone.’

He walked forward, the basket heavy on his arm.

‘I will spread the napkin for a cloth,’ said Walewska.

Felix busied himself in silence with the basket. He set the lark pie in the middle of the cloth and, opening another napkin, displayed the fresh hearts of lettuces,

'And butter, Monsieur Felix?'

'Here, madam.'

Felix lifted the lid from a china pot.

She broke off a piece of bread and buttered it with a silver knife taken from her green leather travelling-case. She smiled at him and offered a china plate. It was of Sèvres, with a design of cupids running round its edge entwined with garlands.

He realised, as he helped her, that she was only a year or two older than he. Her eyes were bright as she tasted the pie.

'Good,' she said with conviction.

She laid down her plate and threw off her hat, pushing back the short fashionable curls that hung to the level of her neck.

'You are silent, Monsieur Felix.'

'Madam,' he said. 'You will be at Nantes this evening, if all goes well.'

Stretching out a silver cup for wine, she paused and looked at him. The mouth, firmly set, suggested some secret thought.

'I have something to say to you, madam,' he continued.

He paused. Now he would have to speak. He could not go back. But she did not seem to have heard him. She was still looking out across the meadow and beyond the stream in which the horses stood up to their hocks drinking and whisking their tails.

'There is something you should know,' he persisted, 'before you see the Emperor.'

She turned her head sharply.

'Yes, Monsieur Felix. What is it?'

'It is a request that I have to make.'

'That recommendation to the officers' school?'

But, of course, I will speak to the Emperor. I have promised.'

'No, madam, it is not that.'

He paused and began to fill her cup.

'I'm afraid I must leave your service, madam.'

He did not dare for a moment to look at her face. He found it, when he did so, set in a mask.

'As you like, Monsieur Marbot. I think I understand.'

Her tone was ice-cold and Felix, stumbling for words, looked at her in amazement.

'Your career no doubt is important to you, Monsieur Marbot, and, though the first step must be taken in the dark with the help of a lady whose position is, as we might say, ambiguous, you would go the rest of the way in the full light of day without fear or favour.'

'Madam!'

He was angry that she should think so meanly of him. He got to his feet, clumsily upsetting a salt-cellar.

'Madam, you have no right to say that. I have never given you cause. I have no such thing in my mind. In serving you I serve the Emperor and that is all I desire.'

She caught his hand and pulled him down beside her.

'Forgive me, Monsieur Felix. I misunderstood. We are both servants of the Emperor. Are we not, Monsieur Felix?'

He raised her hand and kissed it with fervour.

'What is it you want to say to me then?' she continued. 'Why must you leave my service?'

'I do not wish to leave it, madam. But I have so little experience and I fear, on your account, the contrivances of the greatest villain in France.'

She looked at him in astonishment and he continued quickly.

‘It is Fouché, madam.’

She picked up the heart of a lettuce and began to nibble it thoughtfully.

‘What of Fouché?’ she asked. ‘You had better tell me the whole story.’

‘It is like this, madam. He sent for me a day or two after we reached Paris. He received me in his house and asked me a great many questions.’

‘Questions?’

‘About our journey from Poland: how we had fared on the road, whom we met, how we had passed the time. I had dined perhaps too well. I was uncertain of myself, confused. He offered me wine.’

She put down the lettuce and nodded gravely.

‘And he led you, perhaps, to admit that we had become very friendly on the road and that our familiarity exceeded perhaps the limits of discretion. Is that what he suggested, Monsieur Felix?’

He sat back on his heels.

‘Yes, madam,’ he said in astonishment. ‘That is exactly what he did suggest. How did you guess it?’

She laughed and shook her head sadly.

‘It is time you went to that military college, Monsieur Felix. You are young to be about in the world. I hope that you disappointed the Minister?’

‘I gave him no satisfaction, madam.’

‘And you thought no more about it?’

‘Not until lately. But I have since had evidence that the Minister watches us. I wrote to you frequently from Marrac. I could not always take my letters to the post and, when I could not do so, I gave them usually to de Najac.’

‘De Najac?’

'One of the Emperor's pages, madam. One day I ascertained from the courier that de Najac had not sent off one of my letters immediately. I taxed him with his forgetfulness and he gave me my letter back again. I then discovered that it had been opened and that de Najac's lackey, to whom he had in turn entrusted it, was in the pay of Fouché.'

She laughed again but, in the midst of her laughter, fell silent. Still on his knees, he watched her in some perplexity.

'Would to God,' she said, 'that we could turn our horses' heads for Warsaw.'

'For Warsaw, madam?'

'There are times when I hate this country and all the anger and fear that surround . . . *him*.'

Felix found himself groping for words.

'I know what you mean, madam. Indeed I do. But we are here to serve the Emperor and yours is a closer love even than ours who serve him with our bodies on the field of battle.'

'With our bodies,' she repeated, and her cheeks flushed from white to rose.

She turned to Felix and laid her fingers on the sleeve of his coat.

'Do you still think it necessary to leave me, Monsieur Felix? Or will you stay with me and defy the greatest villain in France?'

'If your safety and honour permit, madam.'

'I cannot think that Fouché has it in his power to trouble us.'

She scrambled to her feet.

'We must be going, Monsieur Felix,' she said, 'if we are to be at Nantes for supper.'

§ 2

They went forward at a smart trot along the Emperor's new road which had been finished about a month before. The dust puffed in small clouds from beneath the wheels and hooves of the horses. Felix, swaying in the saddle, looked ahead.

'Nantes, madam,' he said, with a sweep of the hand.

Marie Walewska looked where he pointed. The road swept gently to the left on a long slant. Beyond lay a pool of light, barred with black spars. Pointed roofs reflected back the rays of the declining sun from a hundred angles and, on the edge of the pool of light, a ship stood in dark relief, its bare masts crawling with midget men.

Above the clatter of their progress a confused noise came to them from the hollow in which the city lay. Their speed increased as the road sloped at a steeper angle. The horses broke into a canter. She lay back with eyes closed, one hand gripping the edge of the carriage.

They entered a cloud of dust which whirled about them, dry and choking, and Felix descried in front of them, indistinct in the haze, the back of a large coach painted a dull brown and picked out with gold.

The coach swerved suddenly to the right. There came the sharp sound of an oath in a foreign tongue, as Joachim pulled Oriflamme to the left. Felix at once had his hands full controlling his frightened mare, as she shied from the road and stood beating the air with her forelegs. There followed a screech of metal and a heavy thud. The carriage swayed violently and Walewska was flung sideways. Hoarse shouts broke from the box-seat.

Felix calmed his mare and flung himself from the

saddle, the reins looped over his arm.

‘Are you hurt, madam?’

Walewska, her face a little white, was smiling.

‘Not in the least. Please see what has happened.’

Felix walked forward. Joachim, in bad French, was already at words with the driver of the coach in front.

‘Where in the name of the devil did you learn that fool’s trick?’ he roared. ‘Swinging across the road, no warning at all, with that great lumbering farm-waggon.’

There followed what was presumably a string of Polish oaths.

Joachim was addressing a little man in a smart livery of grey and yellow, whose face, black with dust, was turned towards him. The man was collecting his wits and opening his mouth to retort when a sharp voice spoke suddenly from inside the coach.

‘Silence, Jean. The fault was yours. Get down and lower the steps.’

Felix, standing on the ground, could not see who it was who had spoken from the coach. The dust was settling now and Vladislav, in the road, was soothing Oriflamme.

Felix, still leading his mare and passing behind the carriage, saw that the wheels of the two vehicles were locked together. The steps from the door of the coach came down and two silk stockings ending in black shoes, one of which had a thick high heel, were thrust out. A man in a plain grey coat, with lace at the neck and a three-cornered hat on his head, was descending.

He turned his head as he reached the road. Felix saw a white face, a tip-tilted nose, steady eyes and a smiling mouth. The man was speaking to Walewska.

'A thousand pardons, madam. I accept full responsibility. I am glad to see that no great damage has been done and I am still happier to observe that you are nothing like as frightened as I was.'

The man with the tip-tilted nose turned to his coachman.

'Pull in and give this lady room to pass,' he said shortly.

The coach moved forward a yard and stopped again. The slender figure of its owner stood in the road, hat in hand. Walewska leaned from the carriage.

'It is nothing, sir,' she said, 'and I thank you for letting me pass.'

Felix scrambled back into his saddle and Joachim set the horses in motion. Felix, as he approached the man in the road, saluted respectfully, but the thin figure had turned and was walking to the steps of the coach.

Walewska still leaned from the carriage.

'I have seen that man before, Monsieur Felix. Can you tell me his name?'

'That, madam,' answered Felix, 'was Monsieur de Talleyrand.'

§ 3

'A perfect fit, my dear Courtiade, and this black is well suited to an ex-Minister.'

'In mourning for his perquisites,' added Montrond who, behind his friend, stood leaning against the wall of the room.

'Never cap an intended witticism, Casimir,' chided Talleyrand. 'It kills a poor jest and spoils a good one.'

Talleyrand stepped back and looked at himself in

the two mirrors. One was cracked, the lower being propped against the back of a chair and the higher held up by his valet, so that he could see his reflection more or less complete. The simple coat of black velvet with wide open lapels fitted to perfection above a black satin waistcoat and knee-breeches. Talleyrand adjusted the fall of lace at his throat and shifted the diamond pin in its centre.

‘Now I think we are ready,’ he continued, nodding at Montrond’s round face reflected in the glass.

Courtiade set down the mirror and came forward, offering his master a long black ebony stick and a plain three-cornered hat. Talleyrand set the hat carefully upon his head and, slipping his arm through that of Montrond, limped slowly towards the door.

‘We shall be out of mourning before nightfall,’ said Montrond, ‘if I do not misread the situation.’

Talleyrand smiled, but said nothing as he passed through the ill-fitting door, with its faded gold mouldings, and began to go down the wide, shallow steps.

‘A chair?’ enquired Montrond at his elbow.

Talleyrand shook his head.

‘We will walk together,’ he said.

It was close on eleven o’clock and the summer day was almost at its full heat. The main street of Nantes was crowded and, as Talleyrand stood a moment on the steps of the inn, before turning to the right, a fatigue party of *chasseurs* of the Guard, in shirt sleeves, their forage caps askew on their heads, clattered slowly past, each man riding one horse and leading three others. There was a fine, prancing confusion and an outbreak of oaths, threadbare from excessive employment, as they passed, with difficulty, a great hay-waggon which cumbered the street.

Talleyrand smiled upon the scene.

'Vain repetition,' he said, as a red-faced trooper repeated the same oath for the third or fourth time. 'It gives them the illusion of eloquence.'

Across the road, in front of the Café de l'Empire, once the Café de la Liberté, the tables were already beginning to fill. The people of Nantes were taking the presence of their Emperor with philosophy and good humour. The scarlet livery of a page, moving quickly down the road, made a brilliant splash of colour.

'Have you decided yet what you are going to say to him?' demanded Montrond, as Talleyrand began to move towards the Mairie.

'I have decided what to say,' responded Talleyrand. 'Whether I shall say it is another matter.'

On reaching the steps of the Mairie Talleyrand paused and, half-turning, bent to Montrond's ear.

'I do not know,' he said, 'how long he will keep me, but if possible we will lunch together. In the meantime try to discover where the Walewska is staying.'

Montrond's eyebrows on his red face arched themselves violently.

'Yes,' repeated Talleyrand. 'Walewska is here. Our carriages collided yesterday just outside the town. Courtesy requires that I should present my excuses.'

Montrond nodded.

'She should not be difficult to find,' he said.

Talleyrand climbed the steps. A sentry of the Old Guard looked at him doubtfully for a moment and then came hastily to the present. Talleyrand smiled. As ex-Minister of External Relations he was no longer of the Emperor's cabinet, but His Serene Highness, Prince of Benevento, Grand Chamberlain of the Empire, was still entitled to a salute.

At the top of the steps a group of Imperial pages waited before a wide door. One of them, on seeing

Talleyrand, threw it wide and called his name and titles in a shrill voice.

Talleyrand entered a hall where he was met by a tall major in the uniform of a hussar.

'I have orders, sir,' he said, 'to take you at once to His Majesty.'

Talleyrand lifted his head, but said nothing, and the officer, turning about, led the way up a broad shabby staircase. Talleyrand remembered the house. Not many years before it had been the residence of François de Poissy, but that family had been scattered long ago. The widow was at Twickenham teaching French and the only surviving son was in America.

Talleyrand mounted the stairs slowly. Somewhere above him a door opened and a man came quickly down, booted and spurred, his left hand gripping a despatch case of leather. He nodded to Talleyrand as he passed.

'Off again, Chazal?'

The courier nodded.

'Yes, sir. Back to Spain.'

The man clattered down the stairs and Talleyrand reached the first landing. The major in front of him halted abruptly before a pair of folding doors and rapped. They were opened immediately and the face of a page gleamed suddenly in a shaft of sunlight. The page stepped backwards, bowing as Talleyrand entered.

The ante-room was empty, but a door at the further end of it opened silently and Talleyrand was confronted with a dark face, across which white teeth flashed in a friendly grin.

'The Emperlor,' said Roustan in his queer French, 'awaits Your Highness.'

The Mameluke, splendid in a blue and grey uniform with gold stars on the lapels of his short coat, stood

aside and Talleyrand passed between him and the hussar to find himself in what had once been the salon of Madame de Poissy.

It was a long room running the full length of the house and the windows gave on to the street. They were half shuttered and the sunlight came in raggedly.

'Have them ready for my signature in an hour,' said a sharp, metallic voice.

Méneval slid softly from the room as the Emperor turned and stared very straight at his ex-Minister of External Relations.

Talleyrand bowed low. The Emperor, he noted, had put on flesh since they had last met. He appeared to be in good humour. He was smiling and there was almost a merry light in his eyes. With his hands clasped in the middle of his back and his body slightly tilted backwards, he looked like a cock sparrow insolent for crumbs.

'Well, Talleyrand, I am glad to see you.'

'Your Majesty has done me the honour to send for me.'

'I need your help, Talleyrand.'

'It is yours to command, Majesty.'

Napoleon gave him a whimsical look, as though he invited a less formal approach.

'Well,' he said, 'how did you leave the Spanish Princes?'

'Their Royal Highnesses were in excellent health when I saw them last, three days ago, sir,' said Talleyrand evenly.

'And Madame de Talleyrand?'

'Well, I thank you, sir.'

Talleyrand shifted his weight and leaned a little more heavily on his ebony stick. The Emperor noted the movement.

'Sit down, Talleyrand,' he said kindly. 'We will not stand on ceremony this morning.'

He indicated a small, tightly stuffed arm-chair of green silk.

Talleyrand limped across the room and seated himself. The Emperor began to walk up and down.

'Well, Talleyrand, I have settled the Spanish business,' he said. 'You have heard the news?'

'I am informed that victory has once more crowned Your Majesty's arms.'

'Victory?' the Emperor laughed. 'You may call it, perhaps, a victory. Bessières went through them like a knife through butter at Medina de Rio Seco.'

'And Your Majesty's royal brother?'

'Joseph by this time is in Madrid. It is all over. Spain is pacified.'

'I have heard,' murmured Talleyrand to the ceiling, 'that the Juntas of Asturias, Galicia and Andalusia have appealed to Canning.'

The Emperor wheeled sharply in his walk.

'That is true,' he said, 'and much good will it do them. Except for Saragossa we hold every post of importance in Northern Spain from Barcelona to Burgos.'

He half-turned in his walk as though expecting a contradiction.

'No,' he continued, 'it is finished. I have put all that behind me.'

Talleyrand waited quietly. Napoleon had stopped his pacing. He stood looking down on Talleyrand in his chair.

'We know exactly where we stand, you and I,' said the Emperor suddenly. 'I need your services and I think you will not be sorry to be back again.'

'Your Majesty knows that I am always at his disposal.'

Napoleon gave a short laugh, like the bark of a small dog, his left cheek twitching as he answered.

'Serve me when it serves yourself and when it amuses you to do so. Well, Talleyrand, here is both profit and entertainment.'

He paused abruptly.

'But first,' he added, 'tell me what you and that fellow Ouvrard have been about. The funds are down again. Have you entered the market?'

Talleyrand shook his head.

'The salaries and appointments which Your Majesty has given me are more than sufficient for my simple needs.'

This time Napoleon did not laugh, but, straddling his legs, stared unbelievably at his ex-Minister.

'Talleyrand, be careful,' he said. 'I won't have any Minister of mine tampering with the credit of France. Leave that to the English bankers and merchants. If I do nothing else for France and for Europe, I shall destroy that rabble. The prosperity of nations lies in production and trade. They alone create true values. No man in this Empire shall traffic in money, lend on promises to pay, gamble in margins, as you do, my friend, and Ouvrard and a host of others like you, and every shopkeeper in England with a shilling in his pocket.'

Talleyrand leaned back wearily in his hard chair. The Emperor was mounted upon his hobby-horse and there was no choice but to listen just as long as he chose to continue. Today, it seemed, things were going well. The Emperor could afford to take his ease, allow his mind to wander. This was no longer the man who in a crisis spoke his orders to the point and never wasted a word.

'Shopkeepers, these English, and so they will always remain.'

Talleyrand resigned himself to further patience.

'We shall return,' continued the Emperor, 'to the policy which I initiated in Berlin two years ago. We must cut at the source of England's wealth. We will use the land to destroy the sea. The ports of Spain will now be shut. There remain only the ports of Russia.'

He looked at Talleyrand.

'But surely, sir, I understood that at Tilsit all that had been arranged.'

Napoleon moved impatiently.

'The Czar blows hot and cold. He was blowing hot at Tilsit. He was my friend. But now he is blowing cold. He fears his own merchants. Or perhaps he is trying to bargain with me for a better price. We must blow on those coals again. Alexander must redeem his promises. If he performs what he swore at Tilsit, England cannot last six months. Do you know the number of bankruptcies in the City of London since December last? Over a hundred, Talleyrand. A very small increase in that figure and England will be on her knees.'

He walked to the other end of the room. There he paused a moment, seeming to gaze at the wallpaper. It was of a bilious yellow streaked with festoons of flowers. Once more he turned and Talleyrand saw that he had changed. There was to be no more flow of soul. There was business in his eye.

'I am going to meet the Czar at Erfurt at the end of September or the beginning of October. You will help me to deal with him. You can handle him better than anyone else. I want everything to be clear and definite.'

Talleyrand, suppressing his satisfaction, sat back in his chair.

‘Surely, sir, these are more properly matters for your Minister of External Relations. Champagne should have something to say. He has been in Your Majesty’s confidence for some time and is more familiar with recent events.’

Napoleon darted a sharp look at Talleyrand, who met it with bland solemnity.

‘Champagne does what he is told. He never thinks for himself and he knows nothing. You, on the contrary, think too much and, even in retirement, have arranged to be better informed than any of my Ministers, with the single exception of Fouché.’

‘Your Majesty does me too much honour,’ responded Talleyrand.

‘One other thing,’ said the Emperor. ‘Champagne was not born. He was made by me. I need someone for this business who can meet Alexander and his grand dukes, not to mention the lesser fry from Germany and Austria, on their own footing.’

The Emperor walked to his desk.

‘That is all, for the moment,’ he said. ‘You will receive your instructions later. Meanwhile consider this meeting and what I have said to you as a secret between us. Speak to no one except Duroc. Not even the Empress is yet informed of my intentions.’

Talleyrand bowed and made to move towards the door. Then, as though recollecting something, he turned and paused.

‘You tell me, sir, that the Empress does not yet know that you intend to go to Erfurt.’

‘Well?’

‘Is it your intention that Her Majesty should accompany you?’

‘I go alone.’

Talleyrand still lingered.

‘Well,’ repeated Napoleon, ‘what is it? What is in your mind?’

‘Yesterday evening, sir,’ said Talleyrand, ‘I was the victim of an accident.’

Napoleon lifted his head and stared at him.

‘My coach,’ continued Talleyrand, ‘collided with the carriage of Madame Walewska.’

Napoleon took a step forward.

‘Was she hurt? Why have I had no report of this?’

Napoleon’s voice was sharp with anxiety.

‘No one was hurt, sir. It was not a matter worth reporting.’

‘Then why do you report it?’

‘You will forgive me, sir, if I speak frankly. It was the meeting, not the accident, which troubled me.’

Napoleon continued to stare at him. Then he looked away abruptly, groped in his pocket and produced a snuff-box from which he took a pinch, scattering the grains untidily over his waistcoat. His head went back.

‘I do not see the connection,’ he said, ‘between what we have discussed and the arrival of Madame Walewska here in Nantes.’

‘Your Majesty entrusts me with a mission. I should have thought that, with the Czar Alexander in his present mood, Your Majesty would have deemed it politic to keep Madame Walewska in retreat.’

There was a moment’s silence. Napoleon’s face darkened.

‘Talleyrand,’ he said quietly, ‘tell me exactly what is in your mind and please be as frank as your nature permits.’

Talleyrand came back slowly into the room.

‘Madame Walewska, sir, is regarded by many persons as the ambassador of her country, and the

wishes of Poland cannot be met except at the expense of Alexander. The Czar has doubtless been informed of her recent arrival in Paris. Is it wise to provoke him further, unless, of course, there are very serious reasons for her presence here at this difficult moment?'

The Emperor looked slyly at his ex-Minister.

'Alexander must be made to realise that we have more than one method of persuasion. It is no bad thing that he should feel uneasy regarding my intentions in Poland.'

Talleyrand, who had kept his eyes on the Emperor's feet, raised them slowly to his face.

'If that is the only reason for her presence, I think I understand the position and what I must do,' he said slowly.

'What other reason should there be, except her personal relation to me of which I have made no secret and which has nothing to do with the point you are raising?'

Talleyrand sat silent.

'Come,' said the Emperor impatiently.

Talleyrand moistened his lips.

'The Empire is still without an heir, Your Majesty,' he said with a soft gravity in his tone.

Napoleon rose abruptly to his feet.

'That is not a subject I wish to discuss with you,' he said.

He added quickly and with dignity:

'You will remain at Nantes for the present, Monsieur de Talleyrand. Duroc is in charge of the material arrangements for Erfurt. See him as soon as possible. Meanwhile, I suggest that you pay your respects formally and at once to a lady whom you seem for the moment to be leaving out of account.'

He looked steadily at Talleyrand and fumbled again for his snuff-box.

‘I allude,’ he said, ‘to the Empress.’

§ 4

‘Not ill chosen.’

‘I agree,’ said Talleyrand, looking from the window of the coach.

The little village of Fontenay-le-Comte was spread before them, its red and white houses backed by trees in full summer foliage.

‘And not easy to find,’ added Montrond.

‘So you have said before,’ answered Talleyrand. ‘Such repetitions are ill advised. I might feel it necessary to be grateful and gratitude is a test which friendship seldom survives.’

Montrond grinned expansively.

‘Charles,’ he protested, ‘I know you too well to expect any such sentiment from you. I will now take a stroll in the woods while you interview the lady; unless, perhaps, you need a witness.’

‘I prefer that no one should know what I am doing.’

‘No one will ever know that, my dear Charles. You do not always know yourself. How long shall I give you?’

‘Half an hour, perhaps three-quarters.’

Talleyrand looked once more from the window. They were passing from the village street into a small square fringed with uneven houses. The square was encumbered with preparations for a fair. Men in shirt sleeves were erecting a high pole, watched by the small boys of the village and some of the girls. The air was full of chatter with, for accompaniment, the heavy thud of a mallet on wood. A large striped

tent, with a bedraggled eagle on its pointed roof, was in process of erection on one side of the square. Smaller tents, one of faded purple, with the legend 'La Grande Cleopatre' hanging askew above it, were also in position. On the further side of the square were booths, and from one of them arose the hot smell of boiling sugar.

The people of Fontenay-le-Comte were preparing to enjoy themselves.

The coach stopped a few hundred yards beyond the village opposite a plain house standing a little back from the road. The green shutters were closed, but the knocker on the door was bright and there was a fresh coat of paint on the door.

'A poor setting for the Polish jewel,' said Montrond as Talleyrand prepared to alight. 'It belonged, I understand, to a local tax-farmer in the old days.'

Talleyrand nodded, but did not answer. He stood waiting in the dust while the footman knocked at the door. It opened and a sallow face with high cheek bones appeared. The man, who was in livery, stood aside and Talleyrand entered the house. His ebony stick clacked upon a floor of paving stones.

'Her ladyship,' said the sallow-faced footman with a strong Polish accent, 'awaits your Highness in the garden.'

Talleyrand passed down a dark passage and, through a door at the end, to a lawn of scythed grass. In the shade of a large catalpa tree, at a distance of twenty paces, a seated figure rose to its feet as he advanced.

Marie Walewska was dressed in white and a straw hat swung from her elbow by its ribbons. For a moment he could not clearly see her face, for the light of the afternoon sun was behind her. Then, as she turned towards him, he found her lovelier than he

remembered. There was now a discord in the face that redeemed its prettiness. He noted with appreciation the disorder of her yellow curls and the studied fall of her dress from the shoulders. 'She lives in her mirror,' was his first thought. But the eyes under her dark brows were troubled as she swept him a formal curtsy and he corrected his first impression. 'There is wisdom in her vanity,' he concluded. 'Her toilet is a dedication.'

'You do me too much honour, madam,' he said, deprecating her reverence. 'I am more than sensible of your condescension in receiving me.'

He had meant to continue in this strain, formality being dear to the morganatic ladies of his acquaintance, but the blue eyes warned him that a fulsome approach would be received as a mockery. He noted, also, that she was ill at ease. She opened her mouth to speak, but yet said nothing, as he lifted her hand to his lips.

'Will you not sit down?' she said in a rather breathless voice as he straightened himself from his bow.

Talleyrand seated himself on a chair standing beside a rustic table on which, he noted with faint surprise, stood a slim glass flagon.

'You will taste our Polish cherry brandy?'

The tone was still a little breathless.

'You are too kind,' he murmured.

The cordial was poured. Talleyrand sat back, holding the slim glass for a moment against the light and admiring the deep red colour which glowed above his fingers. The sweet liquor lingered smoothly on his tongue. He set down the half-finished glass.

'Coals of fire,' he said. 'This is, indeed, forgiveness.'

'I beg of you, Monsieur de Talleyrand, to refer no more to our misadventure.'

Talleyrand, with an assumption of great content, looked about him with a flattering appreciation of his surroundings. The shade of the catalpa tree was pleasant. A few roses, somewhat overblown, stood in formal beds in front of a stone wall upon which peaches and dwarf pear trees were espaliered. A pigeon, with beating wings, crossed the segment of blue sky between the top of the catalpa tree and the high-pitched roof of the house.

'In the beginning,' he said softly, 'God made a garden. I read that once in an English book. I would like to see you in my garden at Valençay.'

'I understand, sir, that at this moment you have other guests.'

'True, madam. But my enemies will tell you that I prefer the rising to the setting sun.'

'You have many enemies, Monsieur de Talleyrand. Why be cruel to yourself?'

'I like my friends to know the worst of me. My virtues then come upon them unexpectedly.'

'And so, madam,' he continued after a pause, 'you have come at last to France.'

'The Emperor,' began Walewska, but seemed unable to continue.

'The Emperor has need of us,' continued Talleyrand, 'and I think we are equally content to be used. Between faithful servants, that should be a motive of alliance.'

'I shall not hesitate to avail myself of your friendship should circumstances make it necessary for me to claim it.'

Talleyrand crossed his lame leg over the other and sat up a little higher. The words were impeccable, but the tone was cold.

'How to serve him?' he continued. 'That is the

question. One may have His Majesty's interests at heart, but it is not always clear where exactly they lie.'

'As Grand Chamberlain you are near enough to the Emperor to know his mind.'

'I am as near to the Emperor, or as far from him, madam, as he chooses to allow.'

He waited for her to speak, but she remained silent in her chair.

He tried again.

'Do not forget that for the last year I have been out of touch with events.'

He changed to a graver, more intimate tone.

'Do not misunderstand me. I am not asking you to commit an indiscretion. But the Emperor will expect me to advise him to the best of my ability. To what end should my poor persuasions be directed?'

'These are matters which lie altogether out of my province, Monsieur de Talleyrand.'

'It pleases you to under-rate your position—wilfully, if I may be permitted to say so. It can hardly have escaped you that your presence here is a matter of concern not only to the people of France, but to the courts of Europe. Much may turn upon the extent to which I am honoured with your confidence, madam.'

He saw the blue eyes contract, and her next words, in their simple sincerity, surprised him.

'Monsieur de Talleyrand, what can there be between us?'

He watched her with an added interest, almost with excitement. She had shifted a little in her chair and her fingers were twisted in her lap.

'The Emperor,' he continued, 'is to meet the Czar at Erfurt. I am to go with him and it will be my duty to strengthen the alliance between France and Russia. The fate of your own country is involved. Alexander

will not easily consent to see Poland restored.'

'If Alexander's friendship is necessary to the Emperor, he must pay for it.'

'The price has yet to be fixed, madam. That will be my business, and I would naturally like to know something of your views. Public opinion names you as Polish Ambassador to France.'

He looked hard at Walewska, baffled by her indifference. Was it assumed in pride, timidity or personal antipathy to himself? He could not even be sure whether what he had told her of the meeting at Erfurt was news to her or not. She sat very still and the silence deepened.

Suddenly, to his surprise, he saw that her eyes were full of unshed tears and, before he had recovered from the shock of it, she turned suddenly and thrust out her hands.

'I am tired of this fencing, Monsieur de Talleyrand. It is an art at which I am quite unpractised. You ask for my confidence and you suggest that you may do something for my country. Yet I doubt whether even I can do much. I am a pawn in this game. You would push me here and there between you.'

Talleyrand leaned still further forward.

'May I venture to remind you, madam, that a pawn, on reaching the end of the board, becomes a queen.'

Walewska rose suddenly from her chair.

'It is useless to prolong this interview, Monsieur de Talleyrand.'

Talleyrand also came to his feet.

'I am rejected, madam?'

'I must follow my own view of what is best for the safety and welfare of His Majesty.'

'I had hoped, madam, that our views of what is best might be mutually adjusted.'

‘ I ask only one thing of any servant of the Emperor. I fear that he will need it increasingly.’

‘ If it be anything within my poor capacity, madam.’

‘ Fidelity, Monsieur de Talleyrand.’

§ 5

‘ I have the honour to present Monsieur Pierre Caussac, Sub-Prefect.’

The voice of Duroc was husky from overwork, but the smile of Josephine, worn for the last hour, still expressed a gracious and personal interest in the proceedings. A man in official costume, with the tricolour sash at his waist, bowed awkwardly in front of her, disclosing a bald head fringed with greying hair and beaded with sweat. In a sudden gust of wind, hot as from the mouth of a beast, the pole and guide rope of the canopy beneath which she stood creaked suddenly.

The Sub-Prefect moved on.

‘ I have the honour to present His Reverence the Canon Dompierre.’

Once more Josephine inclined her head, looking out over the black-habited Canon to the dusty square beyond, in which the crowd was standing.

‘ I have heard of your school,’ came the incisive voice of her husband beside her, speaking to the Canon. ‘ You will show it to me tomorrow. I am pleased to hear that so many of your pupils in the higher division are taking the military course, and that special attention is given to mathematics, physics and chemistry—how to fire a gun and so forth. Ten o’clock tomorrow morning. Make a note of it, Grand Marshal.’

Duroc looked with admiration at his master, fresh as paint, though he had been up that day at three in the morning and receiving since eight o’clock.

‘That, Majesty, is the end of the presentations,’ he said with relief.

‘One moment, Grand Marshal.’

The Emperor walked aside with Duroc. Josephine followed him with her eyes. How could he be so perpetually interested in the details of his office? He had a word for everything that came under his notice. Not for a moment of their progress had he relaxed—Pau, Tarbes, Auch, Toulouse, Montauban, Agen, Bordeaux, Rochefort, Paimbœuf, Angers, Tours, Blois and scores of towns whose names were unfamiliar and forgotten.

Her mind went back to the last days at Marrac, the silly pranks which had denoted his good humour: how he had hidden her satin shoes on a July morning when she had gone to bathe, and refused to allow the handsome Captain Niegolewski, of the Polish Light Cavalry of the Guard, to look for them. She had been made to walk barefoot to the carriage, and he had popped up behind her, like an urchin, full of glee at his practical joke. But Marrac and its pleasant follies were far away: the camp beneath the walls and that foolish game of Drogue which she herself had attempted, balancing the leg of a washerwoman’s clothes peg on the tip of her nose in imitation of the local Guards of Honour who seemed to do nothing else when off duty. She travelled again the dusty roads, many times by night, saw the wilting triumphal arches under which they had passed into villages and towns, often at day-break. Little scenes rose sharp and distinct in her memory: thirty children dressed as mamelukes guarding a stone pyramid inscribed with a tribute to Their Majesties; the sham mountain near Tarbes which had opened to let them pass; Marshal de Noé, more than eighty years old, who had ridden all day beside her

carriage without fatigue. Those early days of their progress had not been so bad, but the Emperor's mood had changed on entering the desolate Vendée. The Bretons, it was said, were still royalists to a man. Yet they had cheered as she passed with the Emperor, on horseback this time, beside her coach.

How she had worked for him! Shaken to pieces night after night. Bleak arrivals before the sun was up, to be met by a town which had kept vigil to greet them according to a time-table that left no time for anything. Never a complaint, though her head might be splitting. Gracious smiles and kindly gestures. Personal words and gifts for persons she would never meet again, but with whom she must leave a memory. Keys of the city, presentations, speeches, deputations, petitions, festivals, tributes with flowers, fireworks, excursions to admire the local sights. Never a look upon her face of fatigue or a sign of the boredom that stifled her.

On their arrival at Nantes the last traces of the Emperor's holiday mood had vanished. He had not spoken to her for two days, and the hot town, with its smell of the sea and sour reek of tar and cordage and the lounging sailors land-bound by the British blockade, had so worked upon her nerves that last night she had been threatened with a fit of screaming and Madame de Vaudey, with that little baggage, Mademoiselle d'Avrillon, had put her into a hot bath, which had merely increased her lassitude, till she had felt too weak to do more than sob quietly in the high bed which Napoleon had not visited.

Yet she understood that things were going well. There had been another victory at some outlandish Spanish place. The Emperor had not told her of it, but Duroc had informed her officially. It seemed that

the Emperor could not approach her now except with a maddening formality. There was something behind all this. Talleyrand's coach had been seen in Nantes only the day before and soon they would all return to Paris, though she had received no warning except through the gossip of her ladies.

Things were as bad again as in that dreadful winter, less than two years ago, when the Emperor had refused to let her come to Finkenstein. The corners of her mouth twisted as she remembered his letters: *The roads are too bad—unsafe and deep in mud. . . . Remember how much it costs me not to let you come.* And all the time the Walewska had been keeping house for him quite openly.

The Walewska would be waiting for him in Paris, and from Fouché no word had come of the young man, Felix Marbot. Was it to be inferred that the Polish woman was chaste or was she too wary, perhaps, to be easily compromised?

The eyes of Josephine wandered miserably across the square and then became abruptly fixed. Why had she suddenly been moved to think of Felix Marbot? Had she unconsciously noted him before? For there he stood, in flesh and blood, among the Imperial pages. She had not seen him since reaching Nantes and had been told, on making enquiry, that he had gone to Paris. Now he was back again, doubtless with a letter from the Polish rose.

She came to attention with a start. Napoleon was again beside her.

'I have decided to review the recruits on horse-back,' he said. 'You would do well to return to your rooms. Do not forget the banquet this evening.'

He stepped back a pace, bowed formally and lifted her right hand to his lips. The meaningless

gesture provoked a roar of 'Long live the Emperor! Long live the Empress!' from the crowd in the square.

Napoleon walked towards his horse in a medley of blue and scarlet, green and white, burnished helmets and bright shakos, and Josephine turned to find the Grand Chamberlain of the Empire at her elbow. Talleyrand was in court dress. He held his plumed hat in his hand and was waiting to escort her to her carriage.

She gave him a brilliant smile.

'It is pleasant to see you again, Highness,' she said.

'I am happy to be again in favour, Majesty,' said Talleyrand as he led her away.

She beckoned him to sit beside her.

'It is hot in the town,' she said. 'If you have no more urgent business, you may take me for a drive.'

'At your orders, Majesty,' murmured Talleyrand.

'Long live the Empress,' roared the crowd.

'Do you hear that?' she suddenly burst out.

'My God, Talleyrand, I have earned it.'

Talleyrand bowed.

'I have never seen Your Majesty more gracious. The Mayoress wears her relic with devotion. You strip yourself to win hearts for the Emperor.'

'To my shift, if necessary. It is my problem to wear enough for these occasions. By the end of the day not a jewel is left. My bracelets are scattered through every town in France and rings for every finger through every day of the year.'

'Permit me to admire your devotion, Majesty.'

'The Emperor expects it. Part of the system, Talleyrand. Do you realise that I have had three weeks of it and not one moment to myself. Today I am a hundred years old, but it is the first time in three

weeks that I have allowed myself to admit that I am not the happiest woman in the world. I need a confessor, Talleyrand. I could almost wish that you were still a bishop.'

'I would go further to be of comfort to Your Majesty.'

The carriage moved forward at a slow trot and an escort of the Polish light cavalry closed about it. Josephine leaned forward and spoke to the officer in command so that the carriage did not stop at the Mairie but drove past it and along a wide road running parallel to the sea.

The escort, in obedience to her orders, moved away from the carriage, the first squadron riding on fifty yards, the second dropping the same distance behind.

'We are hardly dressed for a country drive,' said Talleyrand looking ruefully at his plumed hat.

Josephine laughed. She felt a sudden lightness of heart.

'It is a fine afternoon,' she said, 'and I want to talk to you.'

The carriage rolled out of the town. Josephine glanced back over her shoulder. The escort was between her and the second carriage which contained her ladies-in-waiting. She began to speak in a low voice. The coachman on the box had his hands full driving his six horses, with a postilion for the leading pair.

'Why have you come, Talleyrand?' she said, dropping all formality.

'His Majesty did me the honour to send for me,' answered Talleyrand.

'So you will again be Minister of External Relations?'

'That depends on His Majesty,' answered Talleyrand.

'Tell me, Talleyrand,' she said again, 'why have you come?'

The blood was flushing into her cheeks.

'His Majesty is shortly to visit the Emperor of Russia.'

Josephine stretched out a hand and gripped him by the wrist.

'To meet Alexander?'

'At Erfurt. It is a town not far from Jena.'

'When do we start?' she asked.

Talleyrand hesitated.

'When do we start, Talleyrand?'

'Nothing, Majesty, has yet been fixed.'

Josephine dropped his wrist and put a hand to her heart.

'You want to spare my feelings, I see. The Emperor is going alone.'

Josephine sat back and, turning her head away, gazed unseeing at the woods and meadows that streamed slowly past the carriage. The old fear was back again. Napoleon did not mean to take her to Erfurt. The man at her side was aware of plans in which she would have no part.

From habit she forced a smile.

'That is a pretty village, Grand Chamberlain,' she said formally. 'Do you know its name?'

Talleyrand shaded his eyes.

'It is, I believe, called Fontenay-le-Comte, Majesty.'

'We will drive round it and then return,' said Josephine, settling herself in her seat as Talleyrand gave the order.

'And the Princes at Valençay?'

'They are well, Majesty.'

'You provide them, I hope, with suitable distraction?'

'There is good hunting,' answered Talleyrand.

'They have Madame de Talleyrand and her friends?'

Talleyrand nodded gravely.

'They have Madame de Talleyrand and her friends,' he repeated.

'And no doubt they amuse themselves?'

'It is difficult to say,' answered Talleyrand. 'The Prince of the Asturias is not communicative.'

'You are not communicative yourself this afternoon, Talleyrand,' she said sharply.

She checked her rising temper and looked for a diversion.

'That is a pretty child,' she said.

A boy in a ragged shirt and a pair of leather breeches had appeared suddenly from behind a house at the entry to Fontenay-le-Comte. His brilliant eyes stared at them, wide open, from a brown face. Josephine smiled and the boy broke into a run, his bare feet scattering the dust.

'It is the Empress,' he screamed. 'Long live the Empress!'

There was a stir and bustle. People came out of their houses. An old man, sitting at a table, rose shakily to his feet and raised his glass. Two farm labourers stood like stocks, their eyes fixed on the brilliant carriage, while a fat woman in a white apron ducked suddenly and raised a face red and shiny as an apple.

'Long live the Empress!'

Swings and a gaily painted pole from which hung streamers came into view. More villagers ran up

from between a line of booths. An old man in some sort of uniform, with a cocked hat, threw it into the air.

The lips of Josephine were fixed in a smile. She was still Empress of the French.

They clattered through the streets and drove free of the little town. Her eyes were caught by a plain white house with green shutters. Her mind was turned to memories of her trees and flowers at Malmaison. The noise of the shouting had died away.

‘A pleasant house,’ said Josephine.

Through the half-open gate she caught sight of a garden and of a tree in bloom.

She leaned forward.

‘A catalpa,’ she exclaimed. ‘It is like my tree at Malmaison. I did not know there was another such in France. To whom, I wonder, does the house belong?’

‘I do not know to whom it belongs, Majesty,’ said Talleyrand, ‘but I think I know who occupies it at this moment.’

‘Would it be indiscreet to enquire?’

‘I will allow myself the indiscretion. It is Countess Walewska.’

§ 6

‘To Erfurt, Marie. It is a town in Germany, not far from Weimar.’

She felt Napoleon’s hand on her shoulder as he sat down again beside her on the edge of the bed and leaned back against the pillows. The olive face was smooth and the eyes had a sated look. He picked up her hand and kissed it, running his lips up the forearm, and ruffling with his head the silk sleeve of her gown.

'You will come,' he urged.

His dry lips were at her throat again and his hands pressed into her shoulder blades. Then, as the pressure relaxed and she sank back on to the bed, her mind still fluid, she saw Napoleon jerk his silk gown about him and begin to walk in his naked feet.

She propped herself on her right arm.

'Napoleon, why do you ask me to go to Erfurt?'

'I want you, Marie,' he said simply. 'When have I had time to see enough of you?'

He stood on the further side of the room looking back at her. She resisted the impulse to go to him. He was more than her lover. Often she had watched him lying beside her, delivered up, but yet, quite incredibly, the ruler of half the world. He could not be treated as an ordinary man. She had to love him in a strange disparate fashion, her love breaking continually on the thought that her responses might affect the fate of nations, so that her impulse to accept the moment as it came was spoiled and checked.

'Is it wise for me to go?' she asked.

'Must you always be wise, sweetheart?'

'As wise as you allow me to be.'

'Then be wise and come. I need you in Erfurt. Your coming will be part of the game.'

She looked at him quickly. Something caught her spirit, raised and fluttered it.

'Do you mean that Poland may at last be free? Do you mean that, Napoleon?'

She stretched out her hands to him. Napoleon moved towards her and, bending, kissed the fingers, each joint separately, a familiar caress which never failed to thrill her.

'That is what your presence will suggest,' he said.

She drew back her fingers sharply.

‘ But it is not what you mean to do? ’

‘ What I mean to do cannot be decided here in this room. ’

‘ I have a right to know how my coming to Erfurt will affect your plans. ’

He took her in his arms.

‘ You have only one right, Marie—to be adored. ’

‘ You are taking me to Erfurt to frighten Alexander. That is a silly trick, Napoleon. You need his friendship and should treat him honestly. ’

Napoleon released her. His face had gone sullen.

‘ Alexander must be made to see where his interest lies. I shall be gentle with him, Marie, but a hint may be necessary that, if he will not be my true friend and ally, I have other means of finding support for myself in Eastern Europe. I hope it will not come to that. I think I shall persuade him without difficulty to be my friend. My troops are everywhere. Spain is now a vassal State. With the ports of Russia shut to the English ships, we shall quickly be masters of the world. He has only to hold on for six months. ’

He was by her side again, looking down at her. She could do nothing with him in this mood, which always aroused in her an odd mixture of pity and fear.

‘ And if he will not be persuaded? ’ she said.

‘ Then I must try other means. He will know of your presence at Erfurt. Reference will be made to the advantage for France of having a strong State in that part of the world, her firm friend and my own creation, powerful enough to hold Prussia and Austria in check. ’

She thrust out her hands and clutched the silk of his gown.

‘ It is a dangerous game, Napoleon. It may unite all three countries against you. ’

'I shall deal with them quickly before they can unite. But believe me, Marie, it will not be necessary. Persuasion is better than force. Once England is down, we shall draw again the map of the world.'

He gripped her by the hands and pulled her towards him, so that she slipped from the bed.

'Why will you busy your head with these matters? I need you in Erfurt and you will come. Those are your politics for today and now we are going to forget that I am Napoleon.'

His temper had changed and he was laughing. She looked at him doubtfully. Would she ever be able to foresee his moods?

'We will visit the fair together and no one will know of it, except Duroc.'

She allowed him to lead her across the room. Their feet made no sound on the carpet. He pushed open a white door into the dressing-room beyond. Upon two chairs were piles of clothing neatly folded.

'There is your dress,' he said and pointed to one of the piles. 'It is a costume of Brittany. The peasants here have worn the same clothes for the last two hundred years.'

On another chair she perceived a pair of grey trousers with straps beneath the insteps, a black silk stock and a fawn-coloured coat with wide lapels.

Napoleon threw off his dressing-gown and struggled into a frilled linen shirt. In less than five minutes he was ready.

She found it more difficult to dress. Her petticoat or skirt of white flannel was bordered with scarlet about the hem, being sewn to the body in large full pleats. The body jacket was of scarlet cloth, fitting tight to the shape, trimmed with black velvet ribbon embroidered with coloured worsteds. The apron, of a deep mulberry

colour, had to be fastened with a sash tied in a bow at the side. A cap of white linen, set tight on the head, was covered with another cap that served the purpose of a bonnet, made of coarse starched cloth like brown holland, the form conical, with two long flaps hanging down the back. For ornaments she found a necklace of amber and black beads and an ebony crucifix suspended by a velvet string and a brooch made of white bugles and green glass beads.

Napoleon came to help her, turning over the articles one by one, misfitting them, trying again and taking a boyish delight in the business. Soon, however, he grew impatient and, walking to the window, left her to finish alone.

§ 7

A small boy darted between them and sprawled at her feet. Napoleon—Jean Santerre, as she must call him now—picked him up, and the child, looking up at the stranger, decided to laugh, though his knees were bleeding from the fall. Together they took him to the fountain, washed the dirt from his wounds and conducted him to a booth where cooked pies, open tarts and other delicacies were on sale. Napoleon, at parting, pinched him by the ear.

‘Brave lad,’ he said. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

The boy looked at him with solemn eyes as he produced a gold piece.

‘Here’s my picture for you,’ he said. ‘But you mustn’t show it to anybody, not until tomorrow.’

The child, clutching the coin, backed away from them and suddenly took to his heels.

Marie looked after him a moment, till she felt Napoleon’s hand upon her arm. Then they turned and he cleared a way for her through a crowd of girls

attended mostly by privates from the garrison at Nantes, young farmers as yet for all their blue and white uniforms. The soldiers were doing better with the girls than the sailors, though sailors were in the majority. The face of Napoleon contracted at sight of them and she knew that he was thinking of the English blockade. Jean Santerre, in his grey trousers and sober coat, was still the Emperor.

They stood in the crowd watching the sailors, one of whom had thrust his girl into a swing boat and was doing his best, amid the encouragement of his friends, to keep her flying.

'Stop it, Alphonse,' screamed the girl. 'I am going to be sick.'

'Never sick with a sailor, my dear. Up she goes.'

'Come down out of that boat, you bloody sailor-man,' shouted a red-faced sergeant from the crowd, 'or the English will get you.'

There came a roar of laughter, suddenly stilled by the sound of a heavy blow. One of the sailors had struck the sergeant with his fist. Marie pulled her companion back as the crowd made a ring round the combatants.

Two girls and two soldiers passed them by. The men were singing:

'Le sergent prit la plus jeune,
Rantanplan tire lire,
Qui l'emm'na dans sa maison,
Rantanplan tire lire lire,
Qui l'emm'na dans sa maison,
Rantanplan tire lire lon.'

In the centre of the square stood a greasy pole. The hot air was tainted with garlic. Marie clung to her partner. His face was flushed and smiling. Over his shoulder she caught a glimpse of three

or four men seated at the end of a long table. The bare boards were splashed and stained. Half empty measures and glasses stood here and there or rolled empty upon the ground. A thick voice commanded the attention of the drinkers. It came from an old soldier. His blue coat was thrown wide and his gaiters were half unbuttoned. His grizzled moustache dripped wine. One eye squinted grotesquely, drawn upwards by a puckered scar running across the forehead.

'They're a lot of dirty Royalists in these parts,' said the soldier, holding out his glass to be filled. 'You should have been with us in the Holy Land. That is where I first saw the Emperor. He was only a general then, and we were marching through the desert. No wine, no water. Only a lot of god-forsaken sand and a bloody great sun that frizzled you like a fish in a pan of butter. And no falling out on the desert march. Not if you didn't want the Arabs to get you and, if they did, God help you, for their women were worse than the men. The things they did to our wounded.'

'What things, Pierre?'

A little rat of a man with a white face was leaning across the table, thrust into that position by the elbow of a sailor who was making a passage for himself and his girl towards the cock-shies.

The big soldier leaned across the table, so that Marie could not catch his words. She tried to move on, but Napoleon at her side stood firm, listening to the soldier.

'That is what they do to you, my lad. You had to keep in the ranks in those parts if you didn't want to become a soprano.'

A roar of laughter went up from the table.

'We were marching on, you understand, looking for the river. Sand over our ankles, sand in our eyes, sand in our noses and down our throats, sand in the priming pans. Awful stuff. I've been a thirsty man ever since and I shall keep thirsty for the rest of my days.'

Here he drained his glass and held it out for refilling.

'Well, boys, I was the only one of my platoon that had anything at all!'

'God,' said a voice in Marie's ear, 'it's the story of the melon.'

'We had halted a moment and I had a melon in my knapsack, a little shrivelled water-melon, when the General rode by on his Arab horse. His eyes were sunk in his head and his face was grey with sand. He gave us a look and that idiot, Dubois, who was our corporal, shouted out: "Hey, General, do you think you are going to conquer India?" He turned on us, quick as a bayonet. "Not with such stuff as you," he said, and there we all were ashamed and not knowing which way to look. But I went up to him as he pulled up his horse, and I saluted. "Here, General," I said, and I gave him the melon.'

The soldier leaned back.

'And what did he say to you?' clamoured the voices round the table.

'What did he say to me?'—the soldier's eyes were bright as coals—'What did he say? "Thank you very much, soldier." That's what he said. Then he rode on and now he is a bloody Emperor.'

'Competitors for the flitch. Come up, all. Come up, come up.'

A voice was shouting just behind them. The crowd moved and swayed, so that for a moment Marie was off her feet.

‘Had enough, Marie? Want to go back?’

She turned and looked at Napoleon. There were tears in her eyes.

‘No, I want to see it all,’ she heard herself saying.

The movement of the crowd thrust them both forward. She clung to his arm and soon they were standing almost under the greasy pole. A man was preparing to climb it, spitting on his hands. He grasped the pole and began to jerk his way up.

‘It’s old man Dominique,’ said someone in the crowd.

The man, his face red above the white moustache, scrabbled slowly upwards towards the side of bacon which dangled out of reach.

‘He’ll get it,’ said a voice.

The man leaned forward perilously straining after the bacon. His breeches, stretched tight over his buttocks, split asunder. There was a roar of laughter.

‘Hey, Dominique,’ shouted someone from the crowd. ‘It is daylight, but we can see the moon.’

The man looked down.

‘That’s all right, Jean,’ he called back. ‘Your wife saw it this morning,’ and, clutching the bacon, slid swiftly down the pole with his prize.

Napoleon, joining in the laughter, turned away.

‘Come, Marie,’ he said.

He tucked her arm more firmly into his and moved forward to where a bull-necked man, very red in the face, in a ragged shirt and trousers was shouting at the top of his considerable voice.

‘Three shies a penny. Only a penny for three shies!’

Napoleon pushed his way into the front rank of the crowd which had collected round the shouting man. In front of them lay an alley of beaten grass and at the

end of it was a canvas screen stretched on poles. In front of the canvas stood a number of grotesque dolls. One of them, in faded royal robes, with a crown askew on his head, had a placard round its neck bearing the inscription: 'King of Spain!' There was also a dilapidated Turkish emperor, a draggled figure in civilian clothes representing the Englishman Canning, and a figure of indecent aspect labelled 'Prince Regent of England.'

'Three shies a penny.'

Napoleon groped in his pocket for money.

'Six balls,' he said to the cock-shy man.

'That's right, my little gentleman.'

Napoleon began to unbutton his coat as he watched a country lad in front of him complete his turn by knocking Canning sideways.

He thrust his coat into Marie's hands.

'Hold this a moment,' he said, as a small boy ran forward and propped up again the prone figure of the English statesman.

Napoleon cast his first ball. It struck the canvas backing with a thud. His next grazed the shoulder of the Prince Regent, but the third caught the King of Spain full in the face and knocked him flat.

'That's the stuff,' said the keeper of the stall.

Napoleon smiled, showing his white teeth. He picked up another ball. At that instant there came a voice in Marie's ear.

'Get him away from this. It is urgent.'

She turned and saw Duroc beside her.

'Jean,' said Marie, pulling Napoleon by the sleeve of his shirt, 'here is your friend.'

Napoleon turned and, at sight of Duroc, his face changed.

'What is it?' he said sharply.

He allowed Marie to help him on with his coat. Then, thrusting her arm through his, drew her apart from the crowd. Duroc led them away to the right.

‘Despatches, Majesty, from Spain,’ he said.

Behind the canvas backing of the cock-shies stood an officer of Hussars, his uniform thick with dust. His collar was streaked with sweat and the eyes in his face stared straight ahead like those of a waxwork figure.

The Emperor checked his salute with a gesture and took the paper.

Marie, as Napoleon read, saw his features decomposing under her eyes. His head went stiffly back and he crushed the paper in his hand.

‘It is impossible,’ he said.

He turned to the officer.

‘You were at this place—at Baylen?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘With Dupont?’

‘With General Dupont, attached to Major de Sainte Eglise.’

Duroc stepped forward.

Napoleon turned on him with a face of stone.

‘Dupont has surrendered to the Spaniards with all his men. Surrendered without a battle!’

Marie stood gripping the arm of Napoleon.

Behind her came a heavy thud and a shout of laughter as another of the puppets fell upon the turf.

•

CHAPTER IX

§ 1

‘THE visit of His Serene Highness is to be kept as secret as possible, Jules. Serve the luncheon yourself alone. Is that clear?’

‘Perfectly, sir.’

‘Neither guest is to be announced and, if there is any curiosity in the servants’ hall, you will say that they are two old friends of mine, one of them just come over from England. They will probably not arrive together. Please be at hand yourself to receive them.’

D’Hauterive, when Jules had closed the door, frowned unhappily. Politics were exacting. They might even be dangerous, though secretly he was of opinion that his distinguished friend, the ex-Minister of External Relations, would outlast all his contemporaries. But one never knew, and there was no getting away from the fact that Talleyrand was the most reckless gambler in France.

D’Hauterive was happiest among his files or when writing, in a fair deliberate hand, the memoranda which so skilfully conveyed his master’s mind. Yet here he was, about to entertain secretly at his table two of the ablest and most unaccountable men in France. He had no wish to emerge from the industrious obscurity which had enabled him safely to witness the shaping of events

and even to give them an appropriate turn and expression. But alas! He had fallen under the spell. Talleyrand de Périgord, undoubtedly a charmer, had insisted on making a friend of him and had trusted him in the old days even to the forging of an illegible signature to documents which the ex-Minister was too lazy to read.

The Count sighed softly and looked about him. He must follow his master's play, but at least he would have fun for his money. He liked to be in at the birth and death of great events. He walked to one of the broad windows thrown wide to the garden. The terrace was gay with roses, red and white, in spacious urns of grey stone. The bees from his hives round the corner of the house made the happiest music that he knew. He allowed his mind to relax. He was, after all, a spectator and such he was determined to remain. This small estate of Bagneux afforded pleasant relief after the noise and stench of Paris. The village dreamed in a haze away to his left. The tall elms, backing the dwarf oaks, stood motionless in the summer air. It was a pity there were no pines. He was often homesick for the pine forests of Dauphiné.

That this was a crisis admitted of no evasion. Talleyrand wished to meet Fouché and seemed to have no doubt that Fouché would agree that old enmities should cease. His friend d'Hauterive was to arrange it, but all must be done secretly and with despatch. The letter conveying this request had been almost illegible, written in haste and in the elliptical style which betrayed the excitement of high play. The real wonder of it was that Talleyrand, who hated putting pen to paper if he could avoid it, should have written at all.

D'Hauterive, for all his misgivings, had lost no

time. Scarcely recovered from his astonishment, he had that same evening hurried across the Pont de Carrousel and knocked at the side door of the Ministry of Police. Fouché's consent had been flattering and immediate.

The Count started from his reflections as the door opened behind him and he heard an uneven step on the polished floor.

'Good morning, my dear d'Hauterive. Fouché has not yet come?'

D'Hauterive gripped the hand extended to him and shook his head.

'You are early,' he said.

Talleyrand smiled.

'I needed a moment to thank you for your good offices. But I know your weakness and you will have your reward.'

'Reward?' stammered the Count.

'You like watching the comedy and today you have a seat on the stage.'

'A glass of wine?'

D'Hauterive pointed to a decanter on a rosewood table.

Talleyrand shook his head.

'No, thank you,' he answered and walked towards the window where d'Hauterive had stood a moment before.

'Your roses are magnificent,' he said.

D'Hauterive did not reply.

'Fouché will never come,' he thought, and found that he had spoken aloud.

Talleyrand turned from the window.

'We have his promise!'

'Certainly.'

'Did you have any difficulty?'

'He accepted at once. It was as though I had

asked him to see someone he was in the habit of meeting every day. Fouché frightens me. They say he despises men.'

Talleyrand broke his pose and took a pinch of snuff.

'No doubt he has studied himself very carefully,' he said drily.

'Be careful, Talleyrand. It is said that he reserves a place for you in the Temple.'

Talleyrand smiled.

'Perhaps we may share it together.'

'Why should he be so ready to meet you?'

'Your simplicity, my friend, is delightful. I am no longer Minister of External Relations, but I am going to Erfurt.'

'Your mission to Erfurt is no concern of Fouché,' protested d'Hauterive warmly.

Talleyrand tapped him on the shoulder.

'Jealous as ever for the affairs of your department,' he said.

'Be careful, Talleyrand. Fouché is not to be trusted.'

'I therefore intend to be frank with him.'

'Beware of paradox, my dear Talleyrand.'

'Not paradox, my friend, but common sense. Fouché is like Providence, from whom no secrets are hid. I lose nothing by telling him what he is bound to discover for himself.'

Talleyrand had barely finished speaking when the door was thrown open. Fouché stood on the threshold, his long face inclining towards them. From behind him Jules retreated with a hat and riding cloak.

'Come in, my dear Minister,' said d'Hauterive, and aside to Jules:

'Serve luncheon immediately.'

'I fear I am a little late,' began Fouché as he came into the room.

D'Hauterive shut the door and turned to watch the meeting. Talleyrand bowed formally and Fouché returned the salute. Neither of them offered to shake hands.

'I hope I have not kept you waiting,' continued Fouché. 'You are once again, I understand, a busy man and your time . . .'

'Time, my dear Minister,' interrupted Talleyrand, 'is priceless but of no value.'

There was an awkward pause. D'Hauterive came forward.

'A glass of wine?' he suggested.

Fouché shook his head.

'I have too much respect for your vintages to drink before luncheon.'

The double doors at the end of the salon were thrown open. The three men walked towards them and a small comedy was played. Talleyrand made way for Fouché. Fouché held back. Talleyrand insisted.

'The Minister should go first,' he said.

Fouché accepted the precedence but, once in the dining-room, took the chair to the left of d'Hauterive.

'Now that you are restored to favour, my dear Talleyrand, we must all of us yield place.'

Talleyrand silently contemplated his *œufs au miroir*. Fouché continued.

'I feel that my congratulations are due even more to the Emperor than to yourself. His Majesty never had greater need of your services. You have heard the news from Spain?'

'There has been, I understand, an unfortunate incident at Baylen.'

'I have always admired your genius for understatement, Talleyrand. I cannot believe that you have missed the significance of this event.'

'Is it serious?'

'There can be no two opinions.'

'The official bulletin does not give that impression.'

Fouché leaned across the table.

'Do you want the truth, Talleyrand? There were only three thousand casualties but there were eighteen thousand unwounded men who surrendered.'

'As bad as that?'

'You can depend upon my information.'

'My dear Fouché, one can always depend on that.'

There was a moment's silence as the first glass of claret was poured. D'Hauterive sipped his wine. He hoped it would meet the occasion. It seemed of the right temperature and very smooth. Let them drink a glass or two of that and they would end these preliminaries. He had given careful thought to the luncheon, though he had no real interest in food except in so far as it served a diplomatic purpose.

A pale gleam came into the eyes of Talleyrand as he set down his glass.

'A magnificent wine,' he murmured.

Fouché nodded his agreement and wiped his lips.

'At Erfurt,' he said, 'the Emperor must retrieve his position. It will not be an easy task. May I venture to ask whether he has yet indicated a policy?'

D'Hauterive leaned forward anxiously. How would Talleyrand meet this very blunt intrusion?

Talleyrand smiled.

'Your question,' he said, 'assumes that there will be perfect confidence between us. I will answer it to the best of my ability.'

Fouché nodded gravely, but nothing could warm that pale face and d'Hauterive waited in vain for it to change. One of his bees flew in through the open window and fussed heavily among the cut roses on the table.

Talleyrand was speaking again.

'The Emperor,' he said, 'must strengthen his alliance with Russia and at all costs prevent Austria from moving against him till he has settled the affairs of Spain.'

Fouché did not answer immediately. He gave the impression of a man in whose mind issues carefully considered were for a moment evenly balanced. Then suddenly he spoke with a harsh decision.

'These are small measures,' he said. 'They concern merely his present policy, but, if the Emperor is to keep his throne, he must change it altogether. He must bring this country back to her natural frontiers and get himself an heir.'

'Excellent advice,' said Talleyrand. 'It is said that you favour a Russian match.'

'Alexander will never commit himself to a close alliance with France at a moment when the Emperor is embarking upon further adventures in Spain.'

'Where, then, do you look for an heir?'

'Why not to the Polish woman? She has a sense of what is necessary. She would keep the Emperor at home and give us peace.'

Talleyrand shook his head.

'I do not believe it, Fouché. Remember what happened after Austerlitz. I offered him a complete scheme which would have had exactly the effect of what you are now proposing. Possibly he regrets at this moment that he did not take my advice; but, even so, he cannot now consider it. You can consolidate

and even retreat after a victory, but, if you are Napoleon, you can only go forward after a reverse. Napoleon, in these matters, thinks like a soldier. Baylen is a disgrace to his eagles. It must be avenged. The stain must be removed. The language is familiar. You cannot, at this stage, preach moderation to the Emperor. He is the victim of his own prestige. Is there, moreover, a single government in Europe which would have any faith in his moderation? It would be taken as a sign of weakness or as masking preparations for a further advance.'

Talleyrand paused a moment.

'In any case, my dear Fouché, I beg you to dismiss from your mind any combination which would require the friendly co-operation of the Walewska.'

'Why?'

'Neither Russia nor Austria will ever consent to a restoration of Poland. It is, moreover, desirable that we should stand well with the future Empress. Your relations with the Walewska may have been more fortunate than mine, but I know that she would never be my friend. I have cast my seed, but on stony ground. Personal antipathies count for something.'

D'Hauterive signed to Jules to fill the glasses.

'If the Emperor wishes to marry the Walewska, he will not ask our permission.'

'Is he likely to marry her? If so, we shall both do well to consider the consequences, and I would even insist, if we are to work together, that she should disappear entirely from the picture.'

'If you feel it to be necessary,' began Fouché.

'I feel it to be vital,' concluded Talleyrand.

Fouché began to crumble his bread. Quails wrapped in vine leaves were handed round.

‘ You hope to succeed at Erfurt? ’

The question shot suddenly into a silence that still lasted as Talleyrand helped himself unhurriedly from the proffered dish.

‘ It is always possible that the Emperor may succeed,’ Talleyrand said quietly. ‘ It is also possible that things may go wrong. In that case a position would arise in which a loyal servant of France might feel bound to take a painful but necessary decision.’

Talleyrand paused as though, having gone so far, he waited for the other to move.

‘ You mean that, rather than follow the Emperor to destruction, you would seek a way out for yourself? ’ said Fouché bluntly.

‘ Seek a way out for *ourselves*,’ corrected Talleyrand.

Fouché sat silent. Then suddenly, as though acting upon impulse, he rose from his chair. Talleyrand also stood up.

‘ Together, you mean,’ said Fouché.

‘ Together,’ repeated Talleyrand.

Across the body of their astonished host, unprepared for so dramatic a gesture, the two men grasped hands. The alliance was made.

§ 2

‘ I envy Augustus mourning his dead legions, for they at least fell fighting.’

Napoleon paused at last, but only for a moment, for she was unable to answer him or stay the flow. He paced up and down on the thick carpet, his hands twisted behind his back, so that the skin beyond the wrist was white and strained. He had come to the house in the Rue d’Houssaye a quarter of an hour before, bursting upon her through the doors of the

great press. He had crossed the room, snatched up the book she had been reading and sat abruptly down beside her.

At any other time she might have been amused by the trick he had, now almost mechanical, of passing immediate judgment on things by the way. *Corinne* by Madame de Staël was the book she had been reading and he had looked a moment at the title-page.

‘Marie, that woman is a monster. You addle your mind with such trash.’

He had flung the book violently on the floor. Then he had sprung up and begun his eternal pacing.

‘They might as well be the Prussians of Hohenlohe. Nothing can ever restore the honour which is lost by a shameful surrender in the open field. I can afford to lose a battle, but no general can afford to lose prestige. This dreadful act will shake my credit in every corner of Europe. Already we are facing the consequences. The whole of Spain is up. Joseph has been hunted from Madrid. I had the despatch not half an hour ago. My columns are marching north to protect themselves behind the Ebro.’

She took a step towards him. He gripped her by the hand, turning it palm upwards, and pressed it to his lips, which nevertheless still moved. For a time only a stifled murmur reached her ears. She could no longer hear what he said. Then she realised that the theme had changed.

‘You will understand, Marie, that this news has made it necessary for me to reconsider my plans. You would have come with me to Erfurt. But now I must go alone. Alexander must at all costs be pacified. I must no longer seem to threaten him. He must be convinced that our interests are in all respects identical. Your presence at Erfurt might be misconstrued.’

He seemed to expect a protest, but, after a steady look at him, she nodded gravely. 'Of course,' she said, 'you will strengthen your friendship with Alexander till you can withdraw your troops from Spain.'

'Withdraw from Spain? Are you mad?'

His voice rose ungovernably. He placed his hands on her shoulders.

'Marie, I am going to Spain myself.'

His fingers gripped her flesh, but she stood firm.

'I am going to that country and I shall march through it from end to end. In six weeks, in less than six weeks, Joseph shall be on his throne again. I shall wipe out this disgrace and Spain shall be a part of my system.'

She stepped back from him.

'This is madness, Napoleon. Austria will move as soon as your back is turned. Alexander, too, will be waiting.'

'They will wait too long. I shall show them at Erfurt that I am still master of Europe, and, while I am in Spain, Talleyrand will hold them back.'

'Talleyrand!'

She summoned up all her resolution.

'Napoleon,' she said, 'at least be careful whom you trust. Talleyrand has betrayed every cause with which he has had anything to do. No one sees more clearly the dangers that surround you, and at Erfurt he will be working only for himself.'

Napoleon shook his head.

'Talleyrand is the best brain in France. I need him. He has knowledge and no scruples. Do not imagine that I trust him. He has taken bribes from every crowned head in Europe. But at Erfurt our interests lie together. Do not be afraid, Marie. If he should play me false——'

‘Well?’

‘He shall find himself in the Temple. Fouché will ask nothing better than to put him there.’

Napoleon flung out his right hand.

‘The two most able men in France; but they hate each other. So neither is dangerous.’

‘Must you always rely on dividing your enemies? Where will it end? The time is coming when all those whom you have forced into your system will work against you.’

‘Talleyrand, perhaps, and Fouché, perhaps. But never together. That would be a miracle.’

Napoleon flung his head back and laughed aloud. He seemed quite happy again. Marie stared at him in helpless bewilderment.

§ 3

The door of the inner study opened quietly as the clock on the high mantelpiece struck the hour. The night was passing into day.

Fouché raised his head and stared approvingly at the man who had appeared so silently in his room. Marchand, he reflected, had the right sort of face for a spy. Who would take that empty surface, with its staring eyes, long upper lip and retreating chin for the mask of an astute and wary mind?

‘I am sorry, Excellency, but I could not come before.’

Marchand stepped forward into the room and made a slight bow.

‘The Countess Walewska had guests tonight and I could not get away.’

Fouché stared at the man a moment longer, noting the faint trace of footman’s powder still clinging to the sandy hair.

‘Work for you at last, Marchand,’ he said. ‘I am tired of hearing just how often the Emperor visits his mistress.’

Fouché picked up a goose quill and began to tickle his chin with it, still watching the spy.

‘Tell me,’ he said at last, ‘can you move about quite freely in the house?’

‘Yes, Excellency.’

‘Countess Walewska’s Polish servants do not interfere with you?’

‘We are on very good terms, Excellency. I show them the sights of Paris when they are off duty. But——’

Marchand paused.

‘Yes?’ queried Fouché.

‘I am sorry to report, Excellency, that they are not to be bribed.’

Fouché smiled, drawing the quill across his lips.

‘That, Marchand, would be money wasted as long as you belong to the household.’

‘Thank you, Excellency.’

Fouché dropped the quill.

‘Can you let me know, say four or five hours in advance, when the Emperor will next visit the Countess?’

‘I will do my best, Excellency,’ he said slowly, ‘but the Emperor’s visits are not always expected.’

Fouché looked up at the painted ceiling.

‘I will arrange to be informed from the Palace. Now listen, Marchand. This is what I want you to do. When you know that the Emperor is due to visit the Countess, you are to arrange for her equerry, Monsieur Marbot, to come to her room for instructions.’

‘That may be difficult.’

‘Monsieur Marbot sees the Countess daily?’

‘Yes, Excellency.’

‘You announce all visitors to the house?’

‘Yes, Excellency.’

‘Then it should not be difficult to arrange, sooner or later, for his visit to coincide with that of the Emperor. You may not succeed at once, but you can always try again.’

‘You wish me to contrive that Monsieur Marbot shall be with the Countess when the Emperor comes to her in the usual way?’

Fouché nodded.

‘His Majesty will enter, of course, by the private stair,’ Marchand continued.

‘Meanwhile,’ responded Fouché, ‘the door by which Monsieur Marbot has entered will have been locked.’

‘From the outside, Excellency?’

‘From the outside.’

‘But the key, Excellency?’

‘The key will be on the inside.’

Fouché took from the drawer of his desk an object which glittered in the candlelight. He handed it to Marchand and watched him as he gazed at a slim pair of steel pincers of which the ends were long and tapered.

‘A useful instrument,’ said Fouché.

Marchand looked at it doubtfully.

‘Will your Excellency permit me to make the experiment?’ he enquired.

‘By all means.’

The spy picked up the pincers and moved toward the door. On reaching it he pulled it open, observing that the key was on the inside. He passed through the door and closed it behind him. For a moment nothing

happened. Then Fouché saw the key move slowly without a sound, as though some invisible hand were turning it.

'Will your Excellency try to open the door?' came the muffled voice of Marchand.

Fouché laid his hand on the handle. The door was locked. He stepped back.

Once more the key turned and the door opened slowly. Marchand appeared. He took the key from the lock and handed it to Fouché. There was a faint scratch at the end of it where it had been gripped by the pincers. Fouché smiled and walked back to his desk.

'An apt pupil,' he said. 'One other point. When you have locked the door, you will wait outside until the Emperor has entered the room by the private stair. You are then to knock on the door. You will seem to be greatly agitated and you will inform the Countess urgently that the Emperor is coming to the house.'

The empty surface broke into a smile.

'Yes, Excellency. I understand.'

He turned and went towards the door muttering under his breath: '*Madam, madam . . . the Emperor is coming to the house.*'

§ 4

'I shall meet Alexander on the twenty-seventh of September and I have issued invitations to the sovereigns of the Confederation of the Rhine.'

Napoleon walked away from his writing-desk and sat down on the sofa covered with green taffeta which stood near the mantelpiece.

Duroc shifted his weight. Saint Cloud was cooler than Paris, but his official court dress hung heavily

upon him. The Emperor wore the uniform of a colonel of Grenadiers of the Guard, for he was to meet the diplomatic circle—Duroc glanced at the clock—in thirty minutes.

It was the fifteenth of August. The Emperor had returned to Paris the day before and at morning parade the troops had marched past him at the Place de Carrousel. Thence he had ridden back to Saint Cloud, leaving Paris to the merry-makers who were celebrating the Emperor's birthday for the third time since the official institution of the feast.

'You had better take a few notes.'

Napoleon indicated his writing-desk.

Duroc sat down in the Emperor's chair and, leaning forward, picked up a quill. Méneval was the man for this work, but Méneval was still busy in the next room with correspondence already dictated.

'I want everything done with the utmost magnificence. I wish to make an impression. It must be quite clear that France is the richest and greatest country in the world. You will, therefore, see to it that my lodgings and those of the Czar are appointed in the most sumptuous manner possible. Whom do you propose to send in advance? Or can you go yourself?'

'I can hardly spare the time to go myself, sir,' Duroc answered, 'but I shall send de Canouville and de Beausset. They are both thoroughly reliable and can be trusted to carry out Your Majesty's instructions.'

He looked across the room at the Emperor, who was inspecting a plan of the town of Erfurt which was spread on the sofa beside him.

'I, myself,' said Napoleon, 'shall stay in the palace of the Elector-Archbishop. It seems to be the largest building in Erfurt and should therefore be

able to accommodate a great many of the court.'

He spoke without raising his eyes from the plan.

'The Emperor Alexander will occupy the Triebelresidenz and the Grand Duke Constantine the house of Senator Remann. I will leave you to choose quarters for the other princes, but they must all be near at hand. You can distribute them along each side of the main street.'

Duroc scribbled hastily.

'Special accommodation must be found for the suites of all these persons and you will quarter members of every branch of the Imperial household in each billet.'

'Does that apply to the sovereigns of the Confederation of the Rhine, sir, or only to Your Majesty and the Emperor Alexander?'

'It applies to everybody. I wish my servants to wait on all the sovereigns.'

Duroc scribbled: 'Imperial household detachments to all sovereigns.'

'Now, as to furniture. All the appointments are to be sent from our own store-houses. I want carpets and tapestries from the Gobelin and the Savonnerie factories, and you will see that a sufficient quantity of bronzes, lustres, candelabras and Sévres china is available. You will send five hundred workmen from Paris to see to this. They will start the day after tomorrow and they are not to take more than a week on the road.'

Once more the Emperor paused till Duroc should overtake him.

'Inform General Oudinot that he is appointed Governor of Erfurt. He will have the 1st regiment of Hussars, the 6th regiment of Cuirassiers and the 17th Light Infantry under his direct command. That

should be sufficient, but instruct Fouché to select twenty picked men to be on police duty in my own residence in addition to the usual number. You will also station there a battalion of the Grenadiers of the Guard.'

The Emperor stood up as he spoke and the plan of Erfurt fell to the ground. He began to pace up and down.

'For the catering consult Cambacérès. It is to be of the best quality and entirely French. But take a man who understands Russian dishes.

'The amusements will have my constant personal attention. There is a theatre at Erfurt. See that it is embellished and repaired. Give Dazincourt the necessary orders. He is to take the following artists from the Française: Talma, Lafon, Saint-Prix, Damas, Desprès, Varennes and Lacave. That will do for the men. For the women take Duchesnoir, Raucourt, Bourgoin, Rose Dupuis, Grosand and Patrat.'

Duroc looked up a moment. The Emperor was still pacing.

'Got the names, Duroc?'

'Yes, sir. Should I not, perhaps, add Madame Talma?'

Napoleon paused in his walk and turned sharply.

'On no account is Madame Talma to come. She is a bad actress and a loose woman. She is to remain in Paris.'

'Very good, sir,' murmured Duroc.

'Now as to the repertory.'

A knock at the door sounded as he was speaking. Duroc made to rise, but Napoleon signed him to sit down again.

'It is Talleyrand,' he said. 'I sent for him.'

The door opened and Talleyrand entered the room. Duroc, with something like envy, watched his magnifi-

cent approach. The red velvet cloak, lined with white silk, sat upon his shoulders as though it had been the costume of a Vice Grand Elector since Charlemagne, instead of the impromptu creation of David and de Rémusat, ordered to combine opulence with dignity. The slight limp, as he came forward to make his bow, in no way impaired the distinction of the face, curiously aloof in repose, with its tilted nose and carefully powdered background of hair.

‘A thousand pardons, Your Majesty,’ Talleyrand was saying. ‘I fear I am a little late. The diplomatic corps is difficult to mobilise.’

The Emperor smiled.

‘Diplomats won’t march like soldiers; not, at any rate, for you, Talleyrand. Where is de Rémusat?’

A short man in court dress, whose entry Duroc had hardly noticed, came forward.

‘Excellent,’ said the Emperor. ‘I am deciding what plays should be produced at Erfurt. I think we should begin with *Cinna*. Have you the text, de Rémusat?’

De Rémusat produced, with the air of a conjurer, a brown octavo volume and began to turn the pages.

‘Read me the passage,’ said the Emperor, ‘about political crimes which have to be committed for the sake of the State.’

‘As Your Majesty pleases,’ said de Rémusat rapidly. The Alexandrines flowed for a moment unchecked:

‘Tous les crimes d’État qu’on fait pour la couronne,
Le ciel nous en absout alors qu’il nous la donne,
Et dans le sacré rang où sa faveur l’a mis,
Le passé devient juste et l’avenir permis.
Qui peut y parvenir ne peut être coupable;
Quoi qu’il ait fait ou fasse, il est inviolable:
Nous lui devons nos biens, nos jours sont en sa main,
Et jamais on n’a droit sur ceux du souverain.’

‘Good,’ interrupted the Emperor. ‘That will do very well for our German friends. They need to be encouraged in sentiments that will fit them to be good subjects. That is the purpose of poetry.’

Duroc picked up his pen.

‘The other pieces will include *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Zaïre*, *Mithridate*, *Œdipe*, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, *Phèdre*, *La Mort de César*, *Les Horaces*, *Rodogune*, *Mahomet*, *Rhadamiste*, *Le Cid* and *Manlius*. I will settle the order in which they are to be presented later when I get to Erfurt and I may also direct how they are to be performed.’

There was short silence.

‘How long does Your Majesty intend to stay at Erfurt?’ said Duroc.

‘Ten days, but make provision for a full fortnight.’

There came a slight rustle. The door to the inner cabinet opened and Méneval passed silently through. In his hand was an open despatch.

‘This arrived five minutes ago from Portugal, sir. I think you should see it at once.’

The Emperor held out his hand and, taking the despatch, read it rapidly. He raised his head.

‘The English have landed ten thousand men under Wellesley at Mondego,’ he said.

There was silence.

‘I expected this,’ added the Emperor. ‘I shall take such steps as are necessary. We will go now to the reception.’

Duroc rose to his feet and knocked upon the door, which was opened by an Imperial lackey in full livery. Duroc nodded to Talleyrand.

‘His Majesty the Emperor,’ announced Talleyrand in resonant tones.

Duroc stood aside for the Emperor to pass and went

forward behind his master, overtopping him by a head.

On either side of the room was grouped the entire diplomatic corps in full dress. They bowed like the sheaves in Joseph's dream as the short figure in the plain uniform entered. Napoleon paused a moment as they straightened themselves and began to go round the circle. He stopped almost at once immediately opposite Prince Metternich.

The tall Austrian—not really tall, Duroc reflected, but only seeming so compared with Napoleon—bowed a second time. But he bowed as though he did honour to himself—a grave and stubborn salutation.

‘Monsieur de Metternich,’ the Emperor began, ‘what is this I hear of your country?’

The challenge was harsh, as though a master was calling his servant to account for things amiss in the kitchen. Metternich seemed unaware of any offence intended.

‘I do not know what Your Majesty has heard,’ he returned smoothly.

Duroc saw Napoleon's hand crisp a moment behind his back.

‘Indeed, Prince,’ said the Emperor. ‘Then you cannot be very well informed. I am notified of military preparations. Your master is at peace. He is at peace with me. Why is he arming? What are his intentions? Does he mean to break the treaty?’

‘My master's intentions are well known to be pacific, sir.’

Duroc, looking along the line of waiting diplomats, saw them rigid with attention, the younger men unable to conceal their interest and astonishment.

‘I am glad of the assurance,’ said the Emperor, ‘and I hope it will be officially confirmed.’

‘I have no special instructions in the matter, Your

Majesty,' returned Metternich.

Napoleon thrust his head sharply forward.

'You will be so good as to obtain them. Or perhaps you can yourself explain why it is that your Emperor should be arming if his intentions are pacific. Does he prepare seriously for war or is he merely trying to frighten me?'

Duroc felt his scalp begin to prick. The master of Europe was about to speak his mind.

'I venture to think it would be difficult to intimidate Your Majesty,' said Metternich with another stubborn bow.

'You are right, Prince. It would be difficult. Yet you have just called four hundred thousand men to the colours. Is that a pacific act? You are compelling me to summon another two hundred thousand men to the colours of France. Where is the sense of it? If things go on at this rate we shall be arming the women and children.'

Duroc glanced aside at Talleyrand. The Grand Chamberlain and Vice Grand Elector seemed oddly aloof from the scene. His eyes were half shut and his head tilted slightly back.

'Well, sir? You are very quiet this morning.'

Duroc wondered how long Metternich would hold his pose.

'What does your master want with me, I repeat?' persisted the Emperor. 'Is he anxious for me to come again to Vienna?'

The high forehead of Metternich, crossed by a single lock of hair, was still untroubled. The full lips were tightly pressed, but there was no evidence of strain. Duroc watched the impassive face, but watched in vain for it to change. Here was a man whose country had passed under the forks. Yet he stood unmoved. A

sharp misgiving traversed the mind of Duroc. What if this man represented a tradition too old and strong to be broken? Were the victories of Napoleon but shadows playing on the floor of Europe?

The intolerable silence was broken at last by Metternich.

'I can only assure Your Majesty,' he said, 'that I have no information which would lead me to suppose that my master's intentions are other than pacific.'

'Then I look to be informed that he conducts himself accordingly.'

The Emperor turned and his glance raked the line of diplomats waiting for him to complete the circle. Then, to the astonishment of them all, he wheeled about and walked past Talleyrand back to the room from which he had emerged.

The diplomatic group broke up. Duroc, as he turned to follow the Emperor, noted that Talleyrand was already leaving the room. For an instant he looked after the vanishing figure of the ex-Minister.

'He will be at the Bourse within half an hour,' he reflected bitterly.

§ 5

'The list of guests, d'Aigrefeuille. In composing a menu, I like to know to whom it will be offered.'

D'Aigrefeuille groped in the pocket of his tail-coat. The moment had come. His big soft belly shook with the effort he made to extract the paper.

'Serene Highness,' he began as he handed the folded slip to Cambacérès.

Cambacérès, seated half-dressed at the rosewood table at the foot of his bed where he did most of his work, when he worked at all, checked him with a gesture.

'D'Aigrefeuille,' he said, 'you need not, when we are alone, call me Serene Highness. Sir will be quite enough.'

'Certainly, sir.'

D'Aigrefeuille, his eyes fixed upon the list in his master's hand, waited with apprehension.

'Nevertheless,' he reflected, as he stared for distraction out of the window which gave on to the courtyard of the Hôtel Molé in which they had been installed for barely a month, 'I am a marquis and a Knight of Malta. His Serene Highness, save the mark, knows well enough that I am better born. For all his dukedom and the luxury in which he moves, he is only a regicide and, if the Emperor should come to grief...'

'Good God, man!'

The voice of Cambacérès broke upon these reflections. The Arch-Chancellor, his huge face very red, was staring at the list of guests.

'Are you mad, d'Aigrefeuille? Fouché is in this list. And here, too, is Talleyrand. Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'An accident, sir. Unfortunate, I admit. But I was unaware that my colleague, de Chateauneuf, had invited Monsieur Fouché. Monsieur de Talleyrand invited himself. I naturally welcomed the suggestion. Monsieur de Talleyrand is, I understand, once again in the confidence of His Majesty.'

The voice of Cambacérès rose to a thin scream.

'My party is ruined. Not a man in Paris would commit such a blunder as to invite those two men to sit at table together. You must present my excuses to one of them.'

'And let him learn that the other has been preferred?'

Cambacérès gestured despair.

'The table is a large one,' insinuated d'Aigrefeuille. 'They can be widely separated and the effects of a good dinner are incalculable.'

'It will have to be a monstrous good dinner,' grumbled Cambacérès on a lower note, 'that will bring Fouché and Talleyrand to speaking terms. Convey my keen displeasure to de Chateauneuf.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Where is Grand-Manche?'

'He is waiting in the ante-room,' said d'Aigrefeuille, and, moving hastily forward, he opened the door.

A man in a tall linen cap and white apron entered and bowed.

'The bill of fare for his Serene Highness,' said d'Aigrefeuille with importance.

Cambacérès extended a fat hand.

'How many are we tonight, d'Aigrefeuille?'

'Thirty covers, sir.'

Cambacérès examined the bill of fare. D'Aigrefeuille watched him with malicious interest. Cambacérès was a glutton and prone to magnificence. But he was also something of a miser.

'Twenty-four entrées, Grand-Manche? That seems a little excessive.'

'Eight of them, Serene Highness, were left over from yesterday,' replied Grand-Manche with a bob of his white cap. 'They were not even touched.'

'Ha!' said Cambacérès. 'Then it will be an economy to use them. See that they are served first. There was, if I remember, a thrush pie.'

'Your memory, Serene Highness, is exact.'

'Tell the footmen to be careful of the new dishes. They are to be offered, of course, but not pushed. You can cut out the *mousse de foie de volaille*. The

dish will never keep and the leavings are a dead loss. What next? Partridges, roasted on one side and boiled on the other. Really, Grand-Manche, you are spoiling me.'

D'Aigrefeuille heaved a sigh of relief. Grand-Manche had included his master's favourite dish.

'The first partridges of the season, Serene Highness.'

'Indeed,' said Cambacérès, 'and a pretty price you paid for them, I suspect!'

'Nothing at all, Serene Highness,' said Grand-Manche. 'They were a gift to your Highness.'

He tendered, as he spoke, a large quarto register which he opened and laid on the table before Cambacérès. The Arch-Chancellor bent over the pages, running his finger down the items.

'Geese,' he said. 'We have not yet eaten Monsieur de Thionville's geese.'

'Do I put them on the bill of fare, Serene Highness?'

'We have had them a week,' said Cambacérès, 'so perhaps you had better.'

He shut the register and returned to the menu.

'*Quenelles de volaille . . . quenelles de rognons!* But I do not find your *pâté de boulettes*.'

'It is an extremely heavy dish, Serene Highness,' ventured Grand-Manche.

'They agree with me very well,' returned Cambacérès, the veins in his neck swelling above his linen shirt, 'and I wish to eat them frequently?'

D'Aigrefeuille contrived to touch the foot of his kitchen colleague. Grand-Manche must give way or the storm would break again.

The cook bowed his submission.

'A dozen will suffice. They are to be offered only

to me. A special dish, you understand. By order of my physician.'

'Certainly, Serene Highness.'

'See that we have plenty of pastries for the fourth course.'

'Certainly, Serene Highness.'

Cambacérès continued to regard the bill of fare. Then he handed it back with a profound sigh to his cook.

'That will be all, Grand-Manche.'

He turned to d'Aigrefeuille.

'Now for the wines,' he continued.

§ 6

Talleyrand paused at the foot of the grand staircase.

'Let him go first,' he said.

He was looking upwards to where Fouché, already at the top of the stairs, was about to be shown into the room where Cambacérès was waiting to receive his guests.

Montrond nodded.

Montrond, Talleyrand reflected, was an understanding fellow. He would play his part in the comedy.

It had been amusing to receive that morning an urgent note from Fouché warning him that they had both—doubtless by mistake—been invited to dine on the same night by Cambacérès. Fouché had offered to withdraw, but Talleyrand had sent him a message by Montrond, so that each might know how to behave at the meeting.

Talleyrand climbed the broad stairs between lackeys in blue cloth faced with velvet and barred excessively with gold braid.

'His Serene Highness, the Prince of Benevento,' announced the major-domo.

‘My dear Prince, too good of you. I am, indeed, honoured that you should accept my hospitality.’

Cambacérès was booming at him from a throat strangled by the gold collar of his magnificent clothes. Talleyrand murmured a few polite phrases and looked distastefully along the room. It was hung with blue curtains and on the walls were enormous Gobelin tapestries depicting the history of Esther. These in themselves were beautiful, but their effect was spoiled by gaudy covers on the chairs and sofas, while in the place of honour stood a huge chest of drawers. Upon its panels glittered gilt trophies of arms, surrounded with garlands tied with ribbons of bronze, and upon its flat top squatted an azure globe powdered with gold stars.

Talleyrand moved round the room exchanging greetings with his fellow guests. The company was as flamboyant as the furnishings. With the fastidious avoidance of a cat, Talleyrand continued to sidle past the less desirable members of the company with scarcely more than a nod of recognition. Bonet de Freyches, that tedious relic of the Convention, talking to a person who called himself the Marquis Davidal de Montferrier, contrived however to catch him by the sleeve, while in a corner, by one of the tric-trac tables, stood Grimod de la Reynière, President of the Tasting Jury, waiting to claim acquaintance. Talleyrand wrinkled his nose as the man approached. The fellow lived only for his food and was head of a small club of the greediest men in Paris.

‘His Serene Highness, the Grand Duke of Berg,’ came the voice of the major-domo.

Talleyrand turned quickly as Murat strode into the room. Murat, in a costume more than usually fantastic, of red velvet embroidered with gold, carried his magnificence expressively. It declared the man and did

not smother him, though tonight his face was sullen.

Talleyrand moved forward to greet him.

'When may I be permitted to address you as Majesty?' he demanded.

'Not till the twenty-first,' said Murat shortly. 'The Queen and I are to be officially presented at the ball at the Hôtel de Ville.'

'Till then you are king only in the sight of heaven!' said Talleyrand.

Murat stood like a baited bull. He nodded.

'And how did you find the waters of Barèges?' continued Talleyrand.

Murat's face cleared.

'The fountain of youth,' he exclaimed. 'I am a new man. Caroline is ten years younger, or so it seems to me.'

'I hope you will convey to the Queen-elect my most respectful remembrances.'

'His Serene Highness is served,' announced the major-domo.

Talleyrand passed behind Murat towards the dining-room. Fouché, in green satin that emphasised the livid pallor of his face, was well in front and instinctively the other guests drew back to watch the encounter. Talleyrand paused, as though in surprise. Fouché took a step backwards and for a moment they stared at each other. Talleyrand then seemed to master himself. He bowed slightly. Fouché stiffly acknowledged the greeting and then turned pointedly away to join the stream of guests passing through the door.

Talleyrand, taking his place to the left of Cambacérès, noted that Fouché was at the other end of the long table. Cambacérès, avoiding the eyes of his nearer guest, plunged heavily into conversation.

'Mushrooms,' he said. 'They are picked for me daily when in season on the hill of Montmartre. These are the first of the year.'

'Delicious,' murmured Talleyrand.

'And when do you start for Erfurt?' continued Cambacérès.

'About the middle of next month,' said Talleyrand. Perhaps a little earlier. It depends on circumstances.'

Cambacérès nodded gravely.

'Some more sauce, Prince. You have no sauce.'

Cambacérès beckoned and a lackey hastened forward.

The guests, Talleyrand noted, were more intent upon food than conversation. That, however, was true of most of the Imperial functions he attended. Picking at his mushrooms, he sighed after more delicate pleasures. These, however, must be endured. It was part of his new policy to show himself. Paris and the court were waiting and watching. The news that he was to go to Erfurt had spread and those who had thought that Talleyrand was finished were now speculating on his further advancement. The invitation from Cambacérès showed only too clearly how the wind was blowing.

'Starting for Naples in a day or two.'

The voice of Murat, beyond Cambacérès, was already a little thick. To the waters of Barèges had succeeded draughts from a more genial spring. From Murat, Talleyrand's gaze passed to Fouché. Perhaps it would be possible to have a word with him during the reception which was to follow the banquet.

'This, my dear Prince, is a special way of cooking goose.'

Cambacérès, beside him, flourished a slim carving-knife.

‘Allow me to serve you?’

‘I am sure it is delicious,’ said Talleyrand with grave courtesy.

Cambacérès loaded a silver plate.

‘I take it,’ continued Cambacérès, getting on with his work, ‘that you are hardly ready to tell us what you think of the present situation?’

Talleyrand shrugged his shoulders.

‘I am still a little lost,’ he said. ‘It is hard for me to express an opinion.’

Cambacérès laughed aloud.

‘The hermit of Valençay has returned to the world of men,’ he exclaimed.

‘Or shall we say Camillus back from the plough to save the State?’

The harsh voice rang out above the hum of talk and for a moment all turned to look at Fouché, on whose thin lips there was a pinched, ironic smile.

Talleyrand bowed distantly to his enemy.

‘You are pleased to flatter me.’

Cambacérès intervened nervously.

‘Anyhow,’ he mumbled, ‘we are all pretty sick of Champagne. It is good to see you back again.’

‘I am always glad to be of service to His Majesty. But do not, I beg, be too hard upon my old friend Champagne, who is still, I would point out, Minister of External Relations.’

‘The Prince is discreet with us,’ said Cambacérès, and again he laughed aloud.

‘I hope I shall always be discreet,’ retorted Talleyrand. ‘Speech was given to man to hide rather than to reveal his thoughts, and discretion is tonight even more appropriate than usual. I do not often have the pleasure of dining in the company of the Minister of Police,’ and he bowed once more to the green

figure at the end of the table.

Cambacérès, flushing a deep red, turned to Murat.

'A Neapolitan dish,' he exclaimed. 'I ventured to order it in honour of Your Majesty.'

'Majesty be damned,' grumbled Murat, 'and if it's all the same to you, sir, I prefer to wait for my Neapolitan dishes till I get to Naples. I shall get more than enough of them there.'

Talleyrand smiled happily to himself.

'If I might beg your attention, Prince,' came the voice of Grimod de la Reynière, 'it concerns my Jury of Tasters.'

Talleyrand bent graciously to listen.

§ 7

Talleyrand rose and moved with the other guests from the dining-room to a small drawing-room where coffee and liqueurs were served. Dinner had seemed endless and, though he had eaten sparingly and had refused altogether more than half the dishes, yet he was surfeited by suggestion. He sat down, for his right foot ached. He should be taking the waters at Bourbon-l'Archambault. Seated next to him was a young man he did not know. He noticed with amusement that the boy was embarrassed. In sheer nervousness the fledgling fluttered into speech.

'Your Serene Highness, it is reported, will go to Erfurt.'

Talleyrand looked kindly at the blushing youth.

'Young man,' he said, 'what do you know of Erfurt?'

'Nothing at all, Serene Highness. But it is said that our Emperor is to meet the Emperor Alexander.'

A footman passed with a tray. He bowed before

Talleyrand, who nodded. Brandy was poured into a bellying glass.

The footman, inclining less profoundly, turned to the young man.

‘I will take a little brandy too,’ said the boy.

He took the glass and began to drink. Talleyrand gazed at him in whimsical horror.

‘Young man,’ he said, ‘forgive one of riper years if he ventures to offer you a word of advice.’

‘Sir, I should be honoured,’ murmured the young man.

‘That, if you will pardon me, is not the way to drink brandy.’

Talleyrand lifted his glass from the small table beside him.

‘You must take it thus,’ he said. ‘First you warm it between the hands’—he suited the action to the words. ‘Then you shake it in the glass with a circular motion in order to free the perfume.’

The young man watched him, fascinated. Talleyrand lifted the glass and sniffed with appreciation.

‘Seventy-nine,’ he murmured and paused. The young man looked at him.

‘And then, sir?’

‘Then, sir, you should put down the glass and continue the conversation. We were talking politics, I think.’

‘Sir,’ he stammered, ‘the state of Europe . . .’

Talleyrand put a hand on the young man’s knee.

‘At your age,’ he said, ‘I, too, was interested in the state of Europe. But when you tell your grandchildren of this meeting—if my memory should live so long—I hope that you will honour me by recounting that you learned from Talleyrand how to drink a glass of brandy.’

The double doors of the large drawing-room were thrown open. The guests had all risen to their feet. It was time for the after-dinner reception.

Talleyrand stood back as the small drawing-room emptied itself. Cambacérès, preceded by d'Aigre-feuille and de Chateauneuf, his two chamberlains, had already passed through the doors and was making a tour of the people who had been invited to the larger function.

Talleyrand, missing Fouché, looked quietly round. A brocaded curtain, covering a window, wavered slightly and the lean face of the Minister of Police showed an instant against the dark glass behind. The room was empty now except for two lackeys collecting glasses.

'These are my men,' said Fouché. 'They will see that we are not disturbed.'

Talleyrand stepped behind the curtain. Fouché pushed the window further open and they found themselves on a small balcony.

They stood a moment looking down into the courtyard of the house.

'Have you heard the news, Talleyrand?'

'Wellesley landed in Portugal a fortnight ago.'

Fouché smiled.

'Here is something more amusing. You will recall that some fifteen thousand Spanish troops were quartered by the Emperor in North Germany.'

Talleyrand nodded.

'Under the command of the Marquis de la Romana,' he said.

'The English Chargé d'Affaires at Altona has lately been overcome by a strange lethargy. He would often go to sleep standing up or even when talking at the whist table. It has now been ascertained that

the poor fellow, in addition to performing his ordinary duties by day, was working secretly by night and, when at last he went to bed, the citizens of Altona woke up one fine morning to find the Spanish troops had disappeared. Fifteen thousand men removed in a single night. They went willingly, of course. The English fleet just stood by and picked them up. Now, I suppose, they are on the way to Spain. At Altona they find the episode amusing.'

There was a short silence, broken by Talleyrand.

'Things are going badly for the Emperor. At Baylen the world discovered that he was vulnerable; now it sees him as the victim of a comedy.'

Talleyrand paused. Fouché, he felt, was waiting and must be satisfied if their alliance was to become a reality.

'It is now certain,' he said, 'that Napoleon will go to Spain. That decision makes our task at Erfurt much more difficult.'

'If it be your task to secure Alexander's friendship and to restrain Austria from taking action.'

'I shall adapt myself to events. No statesman can do more than that. Sooner or later Austria will move. Sooner or later, unless the Emperor can hold Spain and bring England to terms, Alexander will open the ports of Russia.'

'But Napoleon may not succeed and that would be the end . . . of his system.'

Fouché had paused a moment in the middle of his final phrase. Talleyrand could not see his face, but the significance of that slight hiatus was not to be mistaken.

'It might be the end, you would say, of Napoleon.'

'If things should go really badly in Spain,' began Fouché, and again he paused, leaving the sentence unfinished.

'We must be ready to face that situation,' said Talleyrand.

It was now his turn to pause upon a sentence that seemed to prolong his meaning. He wished again that he could see the face of Fouché. How far was his old enemy prepared to follow him? For himself, in any case, there was no retreat. With or without Fouché he would make good his footing with the dynasties.

Fouché spoke again out of the gloom.

'What, in plain terms, will be your policy at Erfurt?'

'I shall work for the ultimate security of France.'

Fouché stirred in the darkness.

'You put the situation very clearly and, if I hesitate, it is because I do not precisely see what is to be my contribution to the partnership.'

'You will remain here in Paris and hold yourself ready to act if necessary.'

Instinctively the two men drew back. There had come a sudden movement and a flare in the courtyard beneath them. Torches bloomed suddenly like red flowers in the darkness. There was a sound of voices and a clatter of hooves.

'I think our host is starting for the theatre,' murmured Talleyrand.

Fouché did not answer for the moment. Then he turned and, with a sudden gesture, put his hand on Talleyrand's sleeve.

'You mean that, if the Emperor fails, he must have a successor. You mean that I must be ready to effect a palace revolution. Sooner or later that may be necessary. But where do you look for an heir? Frankly I fear that you may be looking to the Bourbons. That would not suit me at all.'

'I will not pretend that I have not had that idea in

mind. Though I have been a servant of the Revolution, I was not a party to its excesses. But I realise that for you that solution is hardly possible.'

Fouché passed a finger over his thin lips.

'Nothing,' he said, 'is impossible. But as one who voted for the death of Louis Capet, it might be difficult for me to make my peace with the family.'

'Therefore, my dear Fouché, I am prepared to look elsewhere, at least for the moment.'

'I am flattered, my dear Prince.'

'I take no credit for this concession,' said Talleyrand. 'I am not myself inclined to think that the time for the Bourbons has come. Do not forget that I am just back from the Vendée. I was sorry to observe a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the royal house.'

'Then where are you looking for a successor?'

Talleyrand glanced behind him. The curtain over the window secluded them sufficiently. There was still a murmur of voices beyond it, but it was almost drowned by the noise of the departure of Cambacérès rising from the courtyard below. Talleyrand drew nearer to Fouché, whose face gleamed impassively in the light of the torches.

'At Valençay,' he said, 'I received a visit from the Queen of Naples. Caroline is ambitious.'

'Murat,' murmured Fouché below his breath.

'He is a good soldier,' observed Talleyrand.

'But devoted to the Emperor,' protested Fouché.

'He has not, he thinks, been fairly rewarded. Also he is ruled by his wife. I will answer for Caroline.'

There was a short silence.

'Think it over,' continued Talleyrand.

He placed his hand on the curtain.

‘ I think that now perhaps we had better go.’

‘ I will follow you.’

Talleyrand, looking into the room, thought at first that it was empty. Then, as he began to cross the floor, he perceived a lackey who was bending over a low chair. From the seat of it protruded a pair of shapely legs encased in polished Hessians fitted with yellow tassels and gold spurs. The lackey was between Talleyrand and the figure in the chair, but enough was visible to identify it as the Grand Duke of Berg and King-elect of Naples.

Talleyrand felt Fouché’s hand on his shoulder.

‘ Benoît,’ said Fouché softly.

The lackey straightened himself.

‘ Leave him,’ said Fouché with a gesture of dismissal.

The lackey moved quietly from the room. Talleyrand and Fouché gazed together at the sprawling figure in the chair. The red-velvet uniform was crumpled, the swarthy face congested with sleep.

Fouché looked at Talleyrand. A low snoring pervaded rather than broke the silence of the room.

‘ And some have greatness thrust upon them,’ murmured Talleyrand as he moved softly towards the door.

§ 8

‘ At last!’

Marchand stretched a leg to relieve his cramp, but kept his eyes upon the street below the window. He had been waiting there ever since he had heard, half an hour before, that the Emperor was on his way from the palace. Felix Marbot had been with the Countess now for some little time and might be leaving her at any moment.

In an agony of impatience Marchand watched the two dark figures which had just emerged from the door which led into the Rue d'Houssaye. They would have to cross that small patch of uncertain light from the street lantern hanging above the wall outside. Marchand did not have to see their faces to know who they were. Their movements were enough for his practised eye. Though their appearance, draped from head to foot as they were in dark cloaks, might have been furtive, yet they stepped forward without hesitation. The taller man was in front. That, of course, was Duroc. Behind him came a short, stocky figure: the Emperor himself, walking with quick, incisive steps. Half a dozen paces would bring them to the door of the house. Duroc would wait below in the shadow of a projecting stone cornice while the Emperor came straight up the stairs behind the door which led to the great press in the bedroom of his mistress.

Marchand sped on the balls of his feet, making no sound on the carpet, through the outer and inner drawing-rooms. Arrived at the top of the main stair, he paused a moment, took the pincers from his pocket and gripped them in his right hand. A single large lantern was glowing faintly beneath him, the only light in the hall. Armand, the janitor, was asleep in his box.

He quickened his pace and ran up a short flight of stairs. His right hand, gripping the pincers, became hot and sticky, a way it had when he was excited. He shifted the pincers momentarily to his left hand and wiped the palm of his right on the seat of his breeches.

He came to a halt outside the mahogany door, fell on his knees and pressed his ear to the keyhole. It was blocked by the key on the inside against sight, but not wholly against sound. He could detect a faint murmur of voices, but the words were indistinguishable.

With a quick gesture—for he had rehearsed the trick a dozen times—he thrust the slim nippers into the keyhole and pressed hard upon their curving handles till he felt the end of the key securely gripped and could turn it with a slow, steady motion to the left.

Slipping the pincers into his pocket, he once more put his ear to the keyhole.

The sound for which he waited came at last, the sharp creak of a hinge. The door of the great press was opening.

He straightened himself, and, clenching his fists, beat hard upon the door.

‘Madam, madam,’ he shouted, ‘the Emperor is coming to the house.’

§ 9

‘It will mean hard riding, Monsieur Felix, but you will understand that I do not wish my letters to be carried by the ordinary post.’

She looked at the boy standing before her. He was in a new suit, she noticed, of green cloth and his cheeks were flushed.

‘I will come to you, madam, within an hour of His Majesty’s departure. They say he will not be long absent from Paris.’

‘You are very good to me, Monsieur Felix.’

She looked pleased, yet a little sad, as the young man bowed over her hand. Such as he would always be ready to serve the Emperor. How long would he continue to misuse their loyalty? She watched him as he crossed the room.

Suddenly he stopped. The doors of the great press had swung open and Napoleon walked rapidly into the room, his hands outstretched.

‘ Marie,’ he said, and his face was radiant.

At that moment came an urgent knocking on the door to which Felix had moved and a voice in great agitation:

‘ Madam, madam . . . the Emperor is coming to the house.’

She stood bewildered. The Emperor halted.

‘ Who is that at the door? See to it, Marbot,’ he snapped.

Felix leaped forward, took hold of the latch and pulled it vigorously. The door quivered, but stood fast. Felix turned surprised, but not yet alarmed. Then his eyes went to the key which protruded from the lock and his face changed. The hushed intimacy of the room in which he had by some accident been imprisoned, filled him with sudden terror. To his right stood the great bed, with its hanging muslins and its brazen feet, and the curtains shrouding the window emphasised a privacy discreetly lit by the twin candles that burned on the mantel-shelf with a steady flame.

‘ The door, sir, is locked,’ he stammered.

He turned the key and dashed forward. The landing was dark and empty and he could see no one on the stairs. He returned to the room, his face as red as the moment before it had been white. Anger had driven out any fear of consequences.

Napoleon was waiting.

‘ How came the door to be locked?’ he demanded sharply.

‘ I do not understand it, Your Majesty.’

‘ There is no one outside?’

‘ No, sir. The passage was empty.’

‘ Shut the door,’ said Napoleon. ‘ Did you enter by that door yourself, or use the private stair?’

'No one but Your Majesty uses the private stair. I entered by that door a quarter of an hour ago, and I swear to you, sir . . .'

Napoleon cut him short with a gesture of his right hand.

'Monsieur Marbot,' he said, 'to protest your innocence would be an insult to your mistress and to my intelligence.'

She felt a sharp pain. Only then did she notice that her finger-nails were pressing deeply into the flesh of her palms.

'Your Majesty's confidence,' Felix began.

Napoleon's hand shot out, and he pulled the young man towards him by the lobe of his ear.

'It is not a question of confidence,' he said curtly. 'You were obviously surprised at finding the door locked and you made no attempt at concealment.'

He turned. 'Marie,' he said, 'whom do you suspect?'

She shook her head.

Napoleon looked quickly from her to Felix and back again.

'There is only one man in France who would dare to interest himself in my private affairs. Bring me the key.'

Felix crossed the room and took the key from the door. The Emperor examined it carefully and held it to his nose.

'Look, Marie,' he said.

She came forward and looked distastefully to where his finger indicated a faint scratch on the metal. Napoleon held the key under her nose.

'Smell,' he said, as though offering her a bunch of lilies.

'Oil,' he grunted and tossed the key to Felix.

'Put it back in the lock, Marbot. It is an old trick, more often used to open than to shut a door.'

He pointed to the press.

'Go down those stairs and report this matter to Marshal Duroc. Tell him that I wish a list of Madame Walewska's servants, with their antecedents, to be placed on my table by nine o'clock tomorrow morning.'

Felix, with his hand on the door of the press, bowed low. Napoleon stayed him with a gesture.

'Tell Marshal Duroc that you are to use the Imperial relays between here and Erfurt.'

'Yes, sir.'

Before the door of the press had closed, the Emperor had put his hand on her shoulders and was drawing her towards him. But she turned away her head. The tears were pricking behind her eyes.

'Sit down, Marie.'

He urged her towards the sofa near the fireplace.

'Come,' he pleaded, 'what is it? There is nothing to fear.'

She sat obediently but could not face him yet. The flush of her pleasure, which had risen keen and quick at his sweeping aside the plot to discredit her, had passed and she now felt discouraged and even desolate. She was, it seemed, fair game to be shot at with the vilest of weapons. The attempt had failed, but it remained like the mark of a dirty thumb upon a fair surface, filling her, too, with a sense of treacheries incomprehensible and unmeasured. Why must Fouché, who had beckoned her to the steps of the throne, now be contriving her disgrace?

She was speaking before she knew that her thoughts were ready.

'Men come to me and suggest what I should do.'

They want to push me here and there and, if I do not move according to their plans, they go other ways to work. I must accept all this and even admit that it is only natural. How are they to believe that I think only of your interests, that it is Napoleon I love and not the Emperor?'

Napoleon was watching her. His eyes were bright beneath half-closed lids. His grip on her hand tightened.

'It is Napoleon you love,' he repeated. 'That, Marie, is what I wish to hear.'

'You believe it?'

'I believe it now, as at Finkenstein.'

'At Finkenstein we were together for some part of every day. I was living in your house, like any wife with any husband. But here you come to me secretly, spied upon by your own servants and Ministers.'

'Tell me, Marie, who has dared to trouble you?'

'Did you think they would leave me in peace? First Fouché. Then Talleyrand. Both have come to me uninvited. For your own honour you must know what liberties these men will take. Fouché told me that for the sake of France I must marry and be your Empress. I must give to you an heir . . . a child.'

'Marie!'

Napoleon had slipped from the sofa. He was half-kneeling in an awkward, twisted posture, his face drawn back and his eyes alight as she had never seen them before.

'Forget these men. Think only of yourself. Is it your heart's wish, Marie? Do you hear me, Marie? You shall be my wife, and you shall bear me a child, not a child to spend his youth hiding from the world and his age in brooding and boasting that his father

was an Emperor, but a royal son, who shall inherit my work for France. Will you do that for me, Marie?’

For a moment she saw in him only a man, passing into middle-age, reckless for her sake.

‘Napoleon, what am I to do?’

The tears were running now unchecked down her cheeks. He thrust himself upon her.

‘You shall be mine before the world,’ he exclaimed. ‘Why should I be denied the right which belongs to the poorest conscript in my army?’

She put up her hands and thrust him away.

‘Remember what is before you. . . . Alexander . . . Erfurt . . . Spain.’

‘What do you say, Marie?’

‘Not now, Napoleon. Ask me again when you return. Do not think of me at Erfurt. Think of the work you must do.’

‘Marie!’

‘Do not press it further now. I must have time to think. My heart has answered already as you wish.’

‘I will wait for your decision, but give me this night the answer that comes from your heart.’

He was kissing her hands, her face thrown back on the cushions, her lips.

His passion flared into ecstasy and was fulfilled.

She held him in her arms, shaken . . . sinking back into a peace that quivered, sighed, but at last was absolute.

§ 10

She stood by the window and watched him pass through the courtyard, a figure behind a lantern hardly to be discerned. The pane was cold to her cheek. He was returning to the Palace. When would she see him again?

The thought of Josephine, sterile and afraid, came suddenly and passed.

He would come back to her for an answer. Empress of the French. . . . Was this the way out of the net he had spread for himself? Give peace to him Give peace to the world. She must try to be sure of that before she could decide.

CHAPTER X

§ I

‘STEADY, Gaston! Hold fast. Easy on the turn.’

The foreman stood exhorting them warily.

Gaston Lemoine, humbleman attached to the Imperial storehouses, rested his burden on his knee and wiped the sweat from his eyes. The Emperor’s desk was a heavy piece, even with six to carry it. The stairs of the Prince Primate’s Palace in Erfurt were broad; even so, there was little room to spare and the monstrous burden, in its coat of sacking, lurched like a heavy merchantman in a rough sea.

Gaston resumed his hold and something scratched the palm of his right hand. It was the claw of one of the bronze sphinxes which supported the legs of the desk. He grunted heavily. More than his share of the weight was on his shoulders. Jules as usual was to blame. Gaston tilted his load towards the offender who staggered responsively.

‘One . . . Two. Up she goes.’

The foreman was at them again.

‘To the first floor, lads.’

Gaston’s cheek came into contact with the straining buttocks of Jacques, who had the upper end. From the corner of his eye he caught sight of a silk stocking, ending in a black shoe with a gleaming buckle. It

skipped upon the landing above, where de Beausset, the Emperor's chamberlain, was fussily overlooking them all. Presently they had reached the head of the stairs.

'Straight ahead, lads!'

Gaston, round the edge of the desk, caught a glimpse of a painted door-post and of a magnificent tapestry, hanging awry, so that a naked goddess, startlingly distinct, seemed to be leaning not too soberly towards him. As he passed this disturbing apparition, someone on a high ladder pulled at the tapestry to lay it square to the wall.

They shuffled into the room and began to lower the desk gently to the floor.

'A little more to the right,' said a peevish voice. 'The Emperor likes to work with his back to the light.'

Gaston looked askance at de Beausset, hopping beside him.

'Steady, men,' came the comforting voice of the foreman.

Gaston stood his leg of the Emperor's desk firmly on the blue-green Aubusson carpet and straightened his aching back. His five comrades were mopping their faces, all except Jules who avoided sweat and all other forms of honesty. The foreman pushed past him and there came a rustling sound as the covering of the Emperor's desk was removed.

'The chairs,' piped de Beausset. 'Get your men to the chairs.'

'Midday, Excellency. My men must have a break. This shift has been at work seven hours.'

The foreman, Pierre, with sleeves rolled up, almost as big as Gaston himself, was standing squarely before the chamberlain.

'You are behind time and must make it up,' snapped de Beausset.

‘Excuse me, sir. These are men under my orders, not machines.’

Gaston stood by in stolid approval. That was the way to treat these court officials. Stand up to them. Pierre was planted foursquare in front of the little man in the silk breeches, who was looking up at him with an expression of petulant annoyance, which changed presently to resignation.

‘Very well,’ said de Beausset. ‘But mind you, half an hour. Not a minute more.’

‘Thirsty work, Excellency,’ said the foreman and waited patiently.

The chamberlain fumbled a moment with his purse.

‘Take this,’ he said. ‘But not more than a litre a head or I shall have your men reeling all over the place.’

‘Thank you, Excellency.’

The foreman turned.

‘Come on, lads.’

Gaston followed obediently. The room was wide and the sunshine poured through its uncurtained windows. The tapestry had been put straight and the goddess, who had seemed so wanton, now stared at him forbiddingly. In the centre of the room a small man, overwhelmed by an enormous candelabrum of gilded bronze, was depositing it carefully on a piece of sacking, spread to protect the carpet, while another man in a leather apron, carrying a snuffer, stood with a brace of footmen who were manipulating a rope that ran over a pulley fixed high in the centre of the ceiling.

Gaston paused a moment to watch the footmen as they put the candelabrum together. One of them was busy thrusting wax candles into the sockets, taking them one by one from a big bundle under his arm.

He stood back as the footmen pulled on the rope and hoisted the candelabrum into place.

Gaston hastened down to the courtyard after his companions. Bread and sausages lay on planks supported by trestles. A girl, with flaxen hair and round blue eyes, had appeared with a china pitcher of wine.

'Ten days or a fortnight, so they say,' stated Pierre as Gaston approached the table.

'Ten days or a fortnight?' echoed the thin voice of Jules, 'and we bring all this baggage from the other end of Europe and take it back again. There's no sense in it.'

Gaston broke off a piece of bread and picked up a sausage from the table. He stood a moment watching the girl pour wine from the pitcher.

'If you had more sense in yourself, Jules,' he said, speaking with his mouth full, 'you'd see more sense in others. The Emperor knows his business. Isn't he coming here to meet the Czar of Russia. And won't there be a pack of kings at his table? Do you want him to hold his court in a hired lodging with a lot of foreign stuff about him?'

'There's as good stuff in the Primate's Palace as any we are putting into it,' objected Jules.

Gaston sat down on the wooden bench beside the trestle. The boards bent beneath his weight. His muscles, relaxing pleasantly, gave him a feeling of warmth and well-being. This was not such a bad town. It was true that the lodging might be better, but the straw in the local school house was warm and the town, of course, would be packed out when the Emperors arrived. Emperors and kings. Kings of Bavaria, Württemberg and Dukes of other places. Over forty of them, so it was said. Gaston wondered where they all came from. And was it true that the Emperor of Russia had hair all over his face and that

there were people in his dominions who ate human flesh? Gaston drowned the speculation in wine and turned to Jules.

‘Listen, Jules. The Emperor has come here to be at home to the royalties. He will receive them at his own table. They will sit upon his chairs and where the Emperor goes, on such business as this, there goes France, and that’s what we’ve been bringing in these carts from Paris, a bit of the old country. Anything is good enough for the Emperor when he goes to war. All he wants then is a mattress and a few planks for a table. But this is different. Now he must travel like a king. My family has been in this business for four generations, since the time of the Great King himself who never travelled with less than three complete sets of everything. My great grandfather was in charge of the bedchamber. There was a bed for where the king might happen to be and a bed waiting for him at his next place of call and a bed on the road in case he might suddenly change his mind and go where he wasn’t expected. That’s how the King of France travelled in those days. And he had a marquis to hand him his shirt and they all stood round holding candles and watching him eat his dinner.’

‘And what came of it all?’ demanded Jules. ‘A bloody revolution. That was the end of it.’

‘You don’t kill a king by cutting his head off,’ retorted Gaston. ‘The Emperor knows that well enough. Everybody likes a show and it’s up to us to give these Russians and Austrians something to talk about.’

‘I’m all for cutting a dash,’ said Pierre the foreman. ‘Money’s round and it’s made to go round. Spending’s good for trade.’

‘Might as well pay us for doing nothing,’ retorted Jules.

'Which would suit you down to the ground, I dare say,' said Pierre and laughed in good humour at his own wit.

'Laugh as much as you like,' said Jules, 'I say that waste is waste and no country can be richer for it. Nor can a country grow rich by shutting out other people's goods. Sooner or later someone will have to pay for all this fighting and spending. What's more, we shall all live to be sorry for refusing to buy from the English.'

'Buy French,' said Gaston. 'That's patriotic and it's common sense. Bring the blasted English to their knees.'

'Hark at 'em.'

A thin reedy voice broke into the discussion. Gaston, cutting off a piece of sausage, looked across the table at the intruder. It was old Benedict, of course, and no one paid much attention to him.

'Warring and wasting,' quavered the old man. 'No one can be the better for the like of that. What do they mean to do, these emperors? Do they come to make peace for you and me? And where is the peace that can give me back my two sons. My eldest, Marcel, was killed in these very parts two years ago come a fortnight. Smashed by a Prussian cannon ball and buried in a sack—what they could find of him. And Alfred was cut to pieces in Madrid by the Spanish scum. That's what it means to us, and you throw out your chests and shout "Long live the Emperor!" and you would do the same if he had murdered your mothers.'

Gaston reached uneasily for the wine pitcher. He felt obscurely that Benedict had a grievance. But it made him a poor companion.

'There's hard cases,' he admitted, waving a generous

hand, 'but you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.'

'War is a bloody business,' agreed Pierre, the foreman, 'but it's business all the same. Keeps us in work and wages. Here's old Benedict himself earning his keep, with still two sons in the army fighting at the Emperor's charges; else he would be living in Charenton on two hot meals a week and no fine-looking wench to bring him his wine and vittles.'

To lend point to this last observation Pierre fetched the blue-eyed German girl a friendly smack on the thigh as she passed him with the pitcher.

Gaston's attention was at this moment distracted from old Benedict and his woes. A man in livery had ridden into the courtyard with a clatter. He slipped from a panting horse a few feet away from them and hastened up the stone steps into the Palace. From beyond the wrought-iron gates came a rumble of waggons and a cracking of whips.

Gaston broke off another piece of bread and bade Jacques pass him the wine, but, as he did so, de Beausset appeared on the steps.

'Time's up,' he shouted.

'Time,' protested Pierre, the foreman, with dignity. 'Time runs fast with your Excellency. My men are not yet breathed.'

'To work,' snapped de Beausset. 'I've just had a message from the Grand Chamberlain. Monsieur de Talleyrand will be here within the hour.'

Pierre rose heavily to his feet.

'To it, lads,' he said and led the way across the paved courtyard towards a great waggon, with shafts pointing to the sky, which had still to be unloaded.

§ 2

‘Company, ’shun.’

Carl Schaeffer paused a moment in the doorway of his wineshop and wiped his hands on his apron. The troops had been passing for half an hour. At the appearance of the first detachment of Cuirassiers, he had been for a moment disconcerted. Did their parade mean that the Emperors were already due? With two tuns of Mosel wine still on the road he was not yet ready. But this, it appeared, was only a rehearsal. The Emperors were not expected yet and the troops were merely practising: just the heads of the columns, he understood, which would on the break of day spread themselves in two long lines, through Erfurt, up to the Bishop’s Palace.

It was lucky for him that his old inn, the Leather Huntsman, which had been in the family now for four generations, should be so well placed. He would get plenty of custom and of the best. Soldiers were thirsty folk and money loose in their pockets. The Frenchmen would call for wine and his tuns would flow fast and free. The Russians, he understood, preferred a kind of schnapps of their own making, powerful stuff which they drank in a single gulp very frequently. Savages, of course, but their money was just as good as that of anybody else, and doubtless they would drink what was provided.

Carl Schaeffer finished drying his hands on his apron and leaned more comfortably against the doorpost. That would be Alexander’s French Guard of Honour and it was being put through its paces by its officers. Fine upstanding fellows, a detachment of the Old Guard of the Emperor, paraded there as a compliment to the Russian Czar. They stood in the October

sunshine, stiff as their own muskets, with great bearskins on their heads. The only perceptible movement came from a little wind blowing down the street which stirred the fur of the bearskins and ruffled their moustaches. These were long-service men who had fought at Austerlitz, Jena, Friedland. Some of them had been with the Emperor in Egypt and Italy.

Wars. Nothing but wars. These men had tramped half the world. To what purpose?

The voice of the N.C.O. addressing the ranks was loud and frequent.

‘Stand to attention there No. 11.’

The sergeant had halted in front of a thickset private.

‘Hold it in, man,’ he said, tapping the fellow’s belly. ‘You look like a girl in trouble!’

Wars! Nothing but wars and the ways of Europe changing from one day to another. The wide world was now for any man who could carry a musket.

But these men had money in their pockets and some of it would now return where it belonged, to the honest folk who kept the peace and minded their own business and waited for this madness to pass.

Carl Schaeffer felt the blood flushing to his brain. What were these damned Frenchmen doing in this German town? He was no politician, God be praised, and had no quarrel with men from other lands. But let them stay decently at home and not come swaggering to his door.

Carl Schaeffer, standing in the sunlight, was moved by a sudden obscure resentment that surprised him. It was monstrous that those soldiers should be there, with Elsa, the little slut, staring her eyes out at the handsome officers and all the children in the town whooping at the spectacle. His mind went back to a grey October evening, when the main street of Erfurt

had been choked with the broken remnants of Hohenlohe's Army, fleeing in rout from the field of Jena just over the hill. That had been a bad day for Germany, but this perhaps was worse. For had not his own Duke, his own Saxe Weimar, one of more than thirty Princes, come to Erfurt to take his orders from the Corsican upstart? Was it all a game of chance? Did the Princes of Germany care for nothing except that they should go on playing, hoping that the luck would turn?

Why had Napoleon come to meet Alexander with all this tramping and flourishing? What new mischief was brewing?

'Stand at ease.'

There came a rattle of muskets from the square and a startled pigeon flew suddenly to the eaves of a house, fluttering over the bearskins.

Carl Schaeffer turned away. It was no use worrying about politics. Princes met and councils deliberated and, as a result of it all, though nobody knew why, men were moved here and there, on one side or the other, and died victorious or defeated as the case might be. Meantime here were these swaggering strangers to be fleeced and fed. He had a sudden vision of Gretel, his wife, back there behind him in the kitchen, bending her red face and ample frame over the stove and taking a look at the game pies for which the Leather Huntsman was famous. No politics for her, or for him either. Gretel was a sensible woman.

Nevertheless he would need tonight something to settle his nerves. Luckily old Peters was coming with his fiddle and they would have a shot together at a new work by that other little man in Vienna.

Carl Schaeffer's eyes shone suddenly. He smiled at the bearskins and at the man on a dusty horse

who had just ridden into the square. The little Corsican with his armies and his retinue of kings would pass away, but that other little man in Vienna would live for ever.

What was that story he had heard long ago from old Jacob Halse who kept the music shop on the far side of the square and had once with his own eyes seen Ludwig van Beethoven and heard him play? If old Jacob Halse was to be believed, Beethoven had inscribed the name of this Napoleon on the front page of his Heroic Symphony, but had struck out the dedication on hearing that the First Citizen of a Free People had made himself an Emperor. The time would come perhaps when someone, lighting generations hence on that sheet with the name of Napoleon blotted out, would wonder who the man could be who had somehow lost the right to be considered worthy of such Promethean homage.

Carl Schaeffer, innkeeper in the city of Erfurt, who often comforted himself with such speculations, was able now to smile without rancour upon the soldiers in the square.

‘Guard, ’shun! Shoulder arms!’

A grey coach, drawn by six horses with outriders, had come into view. It creaked and clattered into the square and stopped before the Leather Huntsman.

‘Guard. Present arms!’

Carl Schaeffer caught a glimpse of a small figure seated in the coach with a tip-tilted nose and sleepy eyes. That face had looked at him from more than one cheap print which had found its way into the bookshops.

Carl Schaeffer turned from the door with a shrug of his heavy shoulders.

That was Prince Talleyrand, come to put everything in order for his master.

§ 3

Josephine, in the garden at Malmaison, turned reluctantly from the roses. The stone terrace beyond which they flowered was one of the places where Napoleon had seldom walked, for he was sensitive to odours and could bear no scent but that of the eau-de-Cologne which he loved. It was a place to which in the old days she had withdrawn to avoid him.

Had there been such a time? It was not easy to recover the mood in which she had found him tedious and had looked elsewhere. Never perhaps wholly tedious, except as a bedfellow. Life had been exciting enough through the brief years which seemed so long in retrospect when, working eighteen hours a day, he had found for France the peace and majesty of a new order.

She pushed open one of the windows and moved slowly towards the couch at the end of the long drawing-room. She shivered slightly and her foot tapped impatiently on the floor as she glanced at the clock.

Walking on the terrace she had heard horses and the grit of wheels. She lay back on the sofa and waited.

Thus would she receive her visitor. No need to consider her words. No need to fear that she would lose control. She had exhausted her emotions. That the Walewska was her husband's mistress seemed now but a trifle.

Napoleon had gone alone to Erfurt. Yet he had sent for Marie to be with him in Paris and he had beckoned her to Nantes. Assuredly he would not have left her to cool her hot little heels in the Rue d'Houssaye without good reason. Fouché had looked to a Russian match to secure the dynasty, and only that day he had come to her hinting that things might be taking such a

course. He had appeared to be warning her as a friend. But who could hope to follow the working of that intricate mind?

Marie Walewska would be with her in a moment. She would use this Polish girl.

The double doors at the end of the long room were thrown open and a name was called. The woman coming towards her wore a high-waisted simple dress of grey with a belt of twisted artificial flowers beneath the breasts.

Leroy charged her a thousand francs for that frock, thought Josephine.

Marie came quietly down the room and, as she drew near, swept into a curtsy.

'Sit down, please,' said Josephine with a light gesture towards a small chair beside her.

'You sent for me, Majesty.'

The voice was cool and the speaker quite composed.

'It was kind of you to come,' said the Empress.

Marie bowed.

'At your service, Majesty.'

'Sweet words, but you should keep them for the Emperor.'

Marie flushed.

'You sent for me, Majesty,' she repeated.

'The Emperor has not always such good taste. Will you not turn your head a little?'

Obediently Marie lifted her chin.

'They call you the Polish rose. The description is not so bad.'

'Your Majesty sent for me to remark upon my looks.'

Josephine looked impatiently at the cool figure. She resented all this dainty composure. This was

Napoleon's mistress, privy, like herself, to the man. She had held him in her arms. As one woman to another they had confidences to exchange; the bawdy, parlour talk in which she delighted. What did this young creature make of his passionate performance?

The impulse came and went. The girl was too aloof. The dark eyebrows would rise in rebuke. The creature looked as though she had eaten rose-leaves. The appeal must be to her reason. Or, perhaps, to her jealousy. These women, of a holy and still conversation, were easily moved that way, envying the lusts from which they pretended to be immune.

'We are both, it seems, deserted,' the Empress continued. 'Napoleon has gone alone to Erfurt. You have news of him perhaps?'

'I have received no letter from him yet.'

'Letters are not always to be trusted. When the Emperor was last in Warsaw I had from him such letters as a wife expects to receive from her husband. He seemed to miss my company. I offered to join him, but he was most considerate. The weather was bad. The roads were dangerous. I must not expose myself to the fatigue and discomfort of so long a journey. As a dutiful wife I was concerned for his lonely condition, but in due course I was relieved to hear that he was far from disconsolate. Let us hope that at Erfurt too he will not be uncomforted. I have never found him reluctant to accept solace by the way.'

Josephine looked keenly at Walewska. The blue eyes were now angry and defiant.

'I think you are mistaken, Majesty. The Emperor has too much on his mind to seek such comforts as you or I could offer at this time.'

Josephine smiled.

'It seems that at Erfurt all must give way to policy.'

There is talk of a Russian alliance. Napoleon may no longer choose his company. I understand that the Czar has sisters and that we may be asked to surrender such poor claims as we have upon his time and person.'

Josephine paused. Was the girl as remote as she seemed? She must break through this indifference. Where was the mainspring, love or policy? She could not see the face beside her. The October sunset was fading beyond the tall windows.

'The Emperor, I understand, is arranging even now to marry one of these Russian ladies.'

Marie turned swiftly.

'It is not possible, Majesty.'

Josephine raised herself from the couch.

'You want to spare my feelings,' she said. 'But I know how things must be. The Emperor has it in his mind to put me away. That is the common talk and Fouché allows it to run unchecked.'

She leaned forward.

'Are we to be set aside?' she asked abruptly. 'It is a question that concerns us both. You lose a lover. I do not ask what that means to you. But you lose also what some say is even dearer. The Russian match would mean goodbye to the Kingdom of Poland. The Czar would never consent to a restoration.'

'Why have you sent for me?'

'We must be friends and act together.'

'Why do you come to me, of all people?'

Josephine felt the blood pricking in her cheeks.

'Am I to see one of Alexander's stuttering sisters here in my place? I would rather Napoleon had a dozen mistresses and, if he must have a child, I would rather——'

Something stuck in her throat. Marie had risen.

'Do not go till I have finished. You think,

perhaps, that it will make no difference to you whether it is I or another who is Empress here. But you are mistaken. I know Napoleon. If he marries a young wife, he will think only of his dynasty. You will lose him altogether.'

'Majesty, I understand.'

'Then why are you here in Paris? In Erfurt you might do much. Go to him. See for yourself what is happening.'

Marie seemed at last to be moved. There was a resolution in her looks. Josephine had again that impulse to break through and take the girl to herself. She saw her own image in the younger woman, caught in the net of policy, fearing to be dispossessed.

'Come closer.'

Obediently Marie stepped towards the couch. Josephine put an arm about her waist and feeling the warmth of the young body was oddly stirred. This girl had borne a child, yielded to the fumbling approaches of an old man. She had been delivered to the Emperor. Was that all she would ever know of a woman's life?

'You will go to Erfurt?' she demanded.

Marie was looking straight in front of her.

'This Russian alliance is necessary to the Emperor,' she said.

'You silly little fool,' exclaimed the Empress. 'Will you allow yourself to be destroyed?'

She felt the girl tighten herself against her embrace and resented this coldness. Had she no blood in her veins?

'You will go to Erfurt,' repeated Josephine.

Marie nodded, but still, gently, struggled to withdraw.

'We are friends then, are we not? Kiss me, Marie.'

‘ I will go, madam.’

‘ Godspeed, little Marie.’

How cool was the mouth and how aloof the body of the girl, as though she were unaware of the urgent arm about her.

Marie disengaged herself and turned quickly to the door. She did not look back.

§ 4

‘ Never allow yourself to be disturbed by events. It can have no effect on them.’

Talleyrand, passing with Montrond from the Bishop’s Palace in Erfurt, smiled and pressed the arm on which he was leaning.

‘ Good advice, Charles, but you are finding it not so easy to follow.’

‘ The stakes are high,’ responded Talleyrand, as they began to cross the square. ‘ You realise that we are committing treason? But I do not think we are likely to lose our heads. Napoleon no longer fears men like you and me. We are merely his instruments.’

Talleyrand was silent for a few paces. Then he smiled again.

‘ What is amusing you, Charles? ’

‘ I was thinking,’ murmured Talleyrand, ‘ that, with the exception of de Rémusat, I am supposed to be the only person at court who knows the etiquette which must be followed in tomorrow’s ceremony.’

‘ Therefore, even in disgrace, you must continue to be the Grand Chamberlain of France,’ answered Montrond.

‘ Yet there are no precedents and all must be invented. There was no necessity to summon me from

Valençay to make it possible for Napoleon and Alexander to meet one another. The English have a saying: nice customs curtsy to great kings. Besides we know our Emperor. We make careful arrangements for him to behave like a prince of the blood and, when the time comes, he behaves like—Napoleon. Meantime it is our duty to see that all is in order.'

'My dear Charles, you have been doing nothing else for the last three hours and de Canouville is running round like a mouse in a cage. The Emperor's lodging is ready from cellar to garret. So is that of the Czar. You have even managed to drive a sense of dignity into de Beausset.'

'Not the least of my achievements.'

'What next?'

'Something more amusing. Talma and his troop have arrived. I must cast my Grand Chamberlain's eye upon them.'

They came in a few moments to the little theatre. Workmen were busy decorating the façade and a man in shirt-sleeves in the doorway enquired their business.

'We want to pass, my friend,' answered Talleyrand.

'Impossible,' said the man, 'the company is rehearsing,' and to give point to his words there came a majestic droning from the semi-darkness within.

Meanwhile one of the workmen, looking up from his task, had recognised the Grand Chamberlain. He nudged the man in shirt-sleeves.

'Pardon, Excellency,' said the man hastily. 'It was the light. I did not recognise your Excellency.'

Talleyrand, with a gesture, cut short his excuses and entered the theatre. Men were draping the boxes with blue and gold cloth. Others were erecting a balustrade a short way in front of the small stage on which Talma himself, a Greek robe thrown over his

everyday clothes, was declaiming. More workmen appeared bearing two small gilt armchairs, which were placed between the balustrade and the stage. Talleyrand paused a moment beside them.

‘A little more to the right,’ he said critically to the foreman in charge of the work.

‘Yes, Excellency.’

Talma turned sharply at the sound of Talleyrand’s voice and his actor’s face lit up.

‘Excellency,’ he exclaimed, ‘this is an honour.’

Talleyrand shifted his hand from Montrond’s arm to his shoulder and walked slowly up the few steps leading to the stage.

‘Busy, Talma? What is the play?’

‘Voltaire’s *Œdipe*,’ responded Talma.

He waved his hand with an easy gesture at St. Prix who was playing Philoctète.

‘Your Excellency knows St. Prix,’ he added.

Talleyrand seated himself on a small painted stool to the right of the stage and picked up the book of the play.

‘I positively will not play in a lemon-coloured peplum,’ came a shrill voice.

Talleyrand looked at the pretty but petulant face of Louise Bourgoïn. She had appeared suddenly at the back of the stage and was trailing the peplum over her shoulder.

Talleyrand inspected her with detachment. Under the Directorate she might have been a power in Paris, but now, though an actress might be spoiled, she must nevertheless be respectable. The theatre must pay for the privilege of being fifth wheel to the Imperial car.

Talma turned upon her swiftly, but without heat.

‘Leave the stage immediately,’ he said. ‘I will decide the colour later.’

The actress looked aside at Talleyrand for sympathy and curtsied.

Talleyrand smiled.

‘His Imperial Majesty the Czar of All the Russias is, I understand, very partial to lemon,’ he said.

‘But my poor complexion,’ she began.

‘Need fear no colour,’ concluded Talleyrand and, still fingering the leaves of the book, turned to Talma.

‘A very noble play, Excellency,’ said Talma nodding gravely.

‘Just so,’ responded Talleyrand. ‘But it may be wise, in presentation, to temper your enthusiasm. There are sentiments here which may commend themselves to an old Jacobin like yourself, but which seem to me hardly appropriate to the present occasion. There is a speech, if I remember rightly, by Philoctète. He assures his friend Oedipus that for him a throne has no attractions. Like Hercules he disdains so poor an eminence. He has made kings in his time, but has never wished to become a king himself.’

‘St. Prix shall deliver the lines,’ said Talma, and sat himself upon a stool beside the Grand Chamberlain.

St. Prix came to the centre of the stage. His figure seemed to dilate as he declaimed:

‘Le trône est un objet qui n’a pu me tenter:
Hercule à ce haut rang dédaignait de monter.
Toujours libre avec lui, sans sujet et sans maître,
J’ai fait des souverains et n’ai point voulu l’être.’

‘He has not the voice or the presence of Talma,’ whispered Montrond in Talleyrand’s ear.

‘Excellent lines, Talma,’ said Talleyrand. ‘But is it wise to have them delivered quite so emphatically?’

Talma raised his hands in a gesture of despair.

‘It is the old style,’ he said. ‘I do my best to correct it, but the tradition is hard to kill. This fellow

will bring upon himself the doom of Montfleury. That was how they delivered a tragedy in the days of the Great King. But the Muse was revenged in her own good time. Montfleury broke a blood vessel at last and died.'

Talleyrand smiled.

'I was thinking of the matter rather than the manner of the speech. Those lines were very successful, I believe, when the Emperor was First Consul, but times have changed. His Majesty has possibly forgotten that Voltaire had a notorious lack of respect for authority. I am inclined to think the passage should be cut.'

Talma started up from his stool.

'That would be sacrilege,' he protested. 'The Emperor has asked for the play and he shall have it. Not a syllable shall be suppressed.'

He turned to St. Prix.

'But please deliver the lines with moderation. Speak, for once in your life, like a human being.'

'These fellows are all alike,' he continued aside to Talleyrand, as St. Prix with an offended air adjusted his peplum. 'They announce that supper is served or that a messenger has arrived as though they came down from Sinai with the Ten Tables.'

Talleyrand was still turning the leaves of the book.

'Here is a line that our friend might perhaps deliver with his usual emphasis,' he said. 'You will find it in the first act, where Philoctète asserts with conviction that the friendship of a great man is a gift from the gods.'

He smiled winningly on the actor, whose sullen face broke at once into a gratified smile.

St. Prix stepped forward:

'L'amitié d'un grand homme est un bienfait des dieux:
Je lisais mon devoir et mon sort dans ses yeux.
Des vertus avec lui j'ai fait l'apprentissage;
L'inflexible vertu m'enchaîna sous sa loi.
Qu'eusse-été sans lui? Rien que le fils d'un roi.'

The chanting voice ceased abruptly. An uneasy silence followed.

'H'm,' said Talleyrand. 'The first line is good. Those that follow are not so happy. We must not inform Alexander too pointedly that but for Napoleon he would be of no more account than the son of a king. Again I would suggest a cut.'

Talma raised his head and Talleyrand continued hastily.

'That being out of the question, you must be careful to get the effect at once on the first line.'

He looked aside at the gilded chairs which had been set in front of the stage.

'The Czar will be sitting there. Address yourself directly to His Majesty.'

'What if His Majesty should fail to take it?' demanded Talma.

Talleyrand smiled.

'I will warn His Majesty in advance and arrange that he shall make a suitable response.'

Talleyrand rose from his stool and put a hand on Talma's shoulder.

'Continue your rehearsal, François,' he said. 'I shall never persuade you to be a time-server. My respects to Madame Talma when you write.'

Talleyrand bowed to the actors in turn and made to leave the stage.

'The first line will please Napoleon,' he said aside to Montrond, 'and the lines that follow will irritate the Czar.'

‘Would you twist even Voltaire to your purposes?’

‘I follow my master’s example, my dear Montrond. The Emperor regards the tragic muse as his special handmaiden. She must be always at his side.’

‘*L’amitié d’un grand homme est un bienfait des dieux.*’

The line, smooth and pompous, followed them as they descended into the auditorium. Then came the voice of Talma.

‘Perhaps a shade more emphasis is permitted. The Czar, I believe, is a little deaf. Go back, St. Prix.’

Once more the actor spoke the line.

Talleyrand turned and waved a farewell to the stage.

‘That ought to get them, Talma,’ he said.

‘It is no matter,’ said Talma.

The rehearsal continued.

§ 5

The scattered bronze of the dwarf oaks was giving way to the solemn thrust of pine and fir, with here and there, a beech tree flaming. Overhead, the autumn sun declined reluctantly. Normally Felix, when he rode, was sensitive to changes of the countryside. He would mark the birds as they flew and read the tracks of hunter and hunted by the wayside. He was still of the country. The business of wood and field enlivened the long hours of riding post, and the changing pattern of light and shade through the branches of trees or the sound of running water was more native to him than the rustle and chatter of his mother’s drawing-room in the Faubourg or the noise and squalor of the Paris streets.

At this moment, however, his mind was on none of these things. For the last two hours he had been

walking beside his horse, which, having cast a shoe from its off forefoot, was going lamer with every step. It was hotter walking thus than riding, and his new boots were meant for the saddle and not for the road. He had put his spurs into his pocket, unfastened his coat and loosened his neck-cloth. But he was sticky between the shoulder blades and the soft aching of his feet was less easy to bear than the hard aching of his thighs.

He had had more than his fill of riding these last few days. From Paris he had ridden, across Europe, to Warsaw and the white house of Pani Lacsinska, the mother of Marie Walewska, to whom he had carried letters for distribution to men and women with names which seemed to contain all the least expected letters of the alphabet. From Warsaw he had started back, across the endless plains of Poland, heading for the rich valleys of Central Germany.

Felix stared sadly down the long road. His friends in Paris had envied him his mission. There would be mighty fine doings at Erfurt. But he was unlikely to see much of them. Duroc would be waiting for him, and Duroc would probably send him posting back to Paris with a message from the Emperor to his mistress.

The tired horse beside him blew suddenly through his nostrils and jerked his head up, pricking his ears.

‘Steady, boy.’

Felix, as he gentled it, heard far away the sound of hooves. Instinctively he slipped his hand up to the saddle and pulled a pistol from the holster. Robbers were not infrequent on the roads: broken soldiers who eked out a miserable life by poaching and highway thieving, deserters from the Prussian Army, before or after Jena, who dared not return to their homes. Such as these, however, would scarcely come trotting down the high road. It was a diligence, perhaps, or

possibly even a post-chaise. The occupants might take a message for him to the next relay and ask for a man to be sent out with a horse.

His heart rose as he stepped aside warily and turned to meet what was coming.

Round the curve behind him a hooded carriage swept into view, drawn by four horses with an outrider and a coachman on the box. The back of the carriage was open. Dust smoked between the feet of the horses and poured from the wheels as it moved forward at a smart trot.

Felix thrust his pistol back into its holster and, slewing round his horse, held up his hand as the carriage bore down upon him. The postilion and coachman, he saw, were in liveries of red and green.

The postilion turned his head and cried out to the man on the box a German phrase which Felix could not understand. The carriage slackened speed, for Felix was half across the road now with his hand still upheld. The postilion drew abreast, shaking his head and waving him aside. A light steam rose from the horses of the carriage as they slowed to a walk and a hand appeared at the window, followed by a head under a hat with nodding feathers.

Felix found himself gazing from a distance of six feet at a lovely oval face with wide-set eyes. The face was startled and the mouth was crying out something to the coachman, once more in German. Felix was well content. This was a lady of rank. He swept off his hat and bowed as well as he could with his horse tugging at the rein over his arm.

‘Madam, a thousand pardons,’ he began in French. ‘You will forgive my importunity.’

The wide eyes were frankly inspecting him and approving what they saw.

‘Come here,’ said the lady in the manner of one from whom such invitations were frequently accepted. ‘Tell me what has happened.’

Obediently Felix stepped forward.

‘It is my horse, madam,’ he said. ‘It has cast a shoe and I was wondering if you would be kind enough to ask at the next relay post that a new mount be sent to meet me. I am on the Emperor’s service.’

‘On the Emperor’s service?’

The lady smiled.

‘Yes, madam. I carry letters for His Majesty.’

‘For which Emperor, may I ask?’

Felix drew himself up.

‘But of course,’ continued the lady. ‘For you there is only one. It is a delusion we must pardon in a Frenchman.’

Felix flushed unhappily.

The lady was mocking and familiar, with an insolence which troubled him.

‘I would not delay you, madam,’ he said a little haughtily, ‘but I should be grateful if you would ask your coachman to deliver my message.’

‘They say that the Emperor Napoleon expects his messengers to be quick on the road. You would perhaps serve him more expeditiously by coming into my carriage.’

‘Madam, you are too kind.’

‘It is easy to be kind to so handsome a petitioner.’

The lady thrust her head out of the window again and called to the coachman. Felix did not understand what she said, but the postilion climbed from his saddle and came walking towards him.

‘*Jawohl, Frau Prinzessin,*’ he said, with a stiff awkward bow, his hand to his forehead.

‘Johann will take your horse,’ said the lady.

‘Madam, you overwhelm me.’

Johann opened the door. Felix climbed in and the lady made room for him.

‘I must introduce myself, madam,’ he said as the postilion slammed the door. ‘Felix Marbot of the Emperor’s household, at your service.’

The lady smiled.

‘I am the Princess Turm and Taxis,’ she said, ‘and I am bound for Erfurt.’

‘I too, madam, am for Erfurt,’ answered Felix, ‘and, thanks to your kindness, I shall now arrive in time.’

‘In time, Monsieur Marbot?’

‘The Emperor, madam, is, I understand, due to arrive there tomorrow.’

‘The Czar, I believe, is already at Weimar. Erfurt will be very gay. You will have some part in the festival, Monsieur Marbot?’

‘I hope so, madam. But that must depend on what the Emperor has for me to do.’

‘You are one of his pages, perhaps?’

‘I hope soon to be one of his soldiers, madam.’

The Princess sighed.

‘That appears to be the ambition of most young men in France.’

‘Of *every* young man, madam.’

The Princess, with a shrug of her shoulders, settled herself more easily in the corner of the carriage. Felix turned to look at her more closely. The nose was aquiline, but the mouth was full and sensual, above a chin which was soft and a trifle too full. From her elaborate travelling dress of dark-blue silk, a fine scent of lilac came to him.

Suddenly she leaned forward.

‘Monsieur Marbot,’ she said, ‘does your family

come from the Corrèze, by any chance?'

'Yes, madam. My father was Baron de Marbot, who died in the siege of Genoa.'

The Princess nodded.

'Now I begin to know you,' she said softly.

She was watching him closely and her glance travelled up and down. He felt the blood mounting to his cheeks.

'Tell me about Paris,' she said. 'Have you no scandals to report? How is that Polish girl?'

'You mean the Countess Walewska?'

'Is she still in Paris?'

'I believe so, madam.'

Marbot had an impulse to confess to the Princess that he, more than anyone, could tell her of Marie Walewska, but he checked himself.

Something white fluttered to the floor of the carriage. The Princess moved nearer. Felix bent down hastily and her fingers brushed his cheek as he came up again, her handkerchief in his hand. He held it out to her. She took it with a caressing gesture, touching his fingers. He turned incredulously to look at her. The manœuvre was commonplace and this was a princess. Was it possible that she had dropped so obvious an invitation? The beautiful face was very close. The eyes and mouth were smiling, and again he was aware of her insolent inspection.

'Thank you, Monsieur Marbot,' she said. 'Tell me now of your adventures.'

'I have had no adventures worth recounting, madam. Some day, perhaps, when I have served in the army...'

The Princess put a hand upon his arm.

'Fighting,' she exclaimed. 'Do you think of nothing else? I had in mind adventures of another

sort. 'Tell me of Paris and its music and the arcades of the Palais Royal.'

'But surely, madam, you must know Paris better than I?'

The Princess laughed.

'It is the heaven we all seek, but few attain it often or stay any length of time. Is it possible that you have lived there and have nothing to say? Come, I insist.'

Felix found himself describing the ball at which he had attended Marie Walewska before the Emperor had set out for Bayonne.

'I counted over three thousand candles,' he concluded, 'and, when Monsieur Julien led the cotillion, the room was like a field of bright flowers moving in sunlight.'

The Princess during his recital had moved closer.

'You counted over three thousand candles,' she said softly. 'Had you nothing else better to do? You dance well, Monsieur Marbot? I am sure of it.'

'I have had little opportunity.'

'I hear that this new rhythm carries all before it in Paris.'

Felix nodded.

'The waltz, madam. It is a nimble measure.'

'So that is how it seems to you, Monsieur Felix, when you dance with a woman in your arms.'

Her voice, which had a slight German accent, was low and vibrant. Her foot touched his. Was it an accident? Felix removed his own. The Princess was leaning forward and her white hands hovered above his knees.

'You take your dancing as exercise and think of battles, Monsieur Felix?'

Again she called him by his Christian name.

Felix doubted this easy conquest. In an obscure way he even resented it. It was almost as though this

lady, as yet unknown to him, commanded him for her pleasure as she would order a lackey to bring her a stool. Yet he was moved, at the same time triumphant and ashamed. He called up his courage and, looking at the lady squarely, was caught by the side-long droop of her full lips and the soft contour of her cheek. She was breathing full and quickly and the small breasts as she turned to him stirred the sleeve of his coat.

She shivered and her hand moved back to his shoulder.

'There is a cold wind,' she said. 'Would it not be better to raise the hood?'

'Certainly, madam.'

'Fritz,' called the Princess.

The coachman turned his head and the Princess said something sharply in German. The carriage stopped and Felix, climbing down, helped the coachman to pull the heavy hood into place. The man's face was expressionless, but Felix realised that this was not the first time he had obeyed such an order.

Felix climbed back into the carriage. It started with a jerk and he was thrown against his companion, who caught his arm to steady him. He could no longer see the broad back of the coachman. The Princess had pulled a little curtain over the window on her side and he felt her leaning slightly against him in the half darkness.

'This is better, is it not, Monsieur Felix?' she said.

Light as a feather her hand was on his knee, a pressure hardly to be felt and yet filling his consciousness so that for a moment he was aware of nothing else. Then the confusion cleared and he was alive to other things: the heavy lilac scent she used, the pressure of

her body against his own, his own position with one arm lying along the back of the carriage behind her, the almost imperceptible gesture of her free hand towards it as though it would close the circle.

The two hands met of their own volition. She pulled his arm down to be held more firmly. Her head went back and the full mouth came to meet him.

What was the last message he read in the breaking curve of her lips? A beseeching which could be shameless because it promised so much? Here was a woman who might ask for anything she pleased, knowing that she could make a full return.

§ 6

Guardsman Pierre Laval, standing at ease before the Elector Archbishop's Palace, looked out across the square. He had been on parade since eight in the morning and it was now past noon. Also he had sat up half the night pipe-claying his uniform. An hour ago he had wondered, tired and hot as he was, whether he would be able to stand the strain, for he was of the sort that could more easily march than stand idle. But, as the great moment approached, his fatigue had vanished and now he was fresh and eager for the show.

The sunlight warmed the paving of the square. Immediately to his right the wrought-iron gates of the Palace had swung open, pushed by two lackeys in the livery of the Duke of Weimar; and, as he looked, there came down the stone steps leading from the main door a group of persons very finely dressed. In front walked the King of Saxony, short but dignified, in the uniform of a colonel of Saxon Dragoons. He halted at the

bottom of the steps where he stood fingering the hilt of his huge sabre. The stars and orders on his chest gleamed. Behind him were his chamberlains, the Counts Macolini, Haag and Boze, who would act also as chamberlains to the Emperor. They, too, were in full uniform, not quite so splattered with baubles as their master, but very splendid in the autumn sunshine. Above them, on the steps near the portico, stood a more sober company. Mere civilians these, in flowing gowns with velvet caps on their heads and chains of office, members of the Regency and the mayor of the municipality of Erfurt. The mayor, a lean, gaunt man, was fingering a pair of horn spectacles, and his right hand grasped a roll of paper on which the address of welcome was inscribed.

Out of sight, down the main street, sounded a distant clamour, like the sea tearing at pebbled beaches. Laval instinctively braced himself and, a moment later, above the welling noise, he heard a word of command.

‘ Grenadiers of the Guard, ’shun! Shoulder arms! ’

Laval brought his musket to his left shoulder and his right hand sharply down to his side. All lethargy was lost in the exaltation that now possessed him. To his right, in their finery, were kings and counts and nobles waiting to welcome the master from whom they drew their riches and importance, just as he, a simple grenadier, drew his guard’s pay. Round the corner of the street the horses came into view, and the faces of the people, massed on either side, swayed like a field of daisies. A carriage-and-six clattered into view and, sweeping round the square, drew up with a jerk a yard or two away. Almost before the wheels had ceased to turn, a dark figure, in blue and silver, had leaped from the back of the carriage. It tore open the door, let down the steps and retreated, inclining a turbaned head

and placing hands to its forehead. That was the Mameluke Roustan, and Laval, as he watched, had a swift vision of the Pyramids in blinding heat and of yelling horsemen who charged at him with bright scimitars.

A plump leg, clad in a white silk stocking that ended in a black shoe, was thrust from the carriage and, at the same instant, another word of command rang out. Laval slapped the stock of his musket and lowered it smartly, steady and taut, in front of his body. The little man in the green coat, with just two stars on the left breast, stood a moment bare-headed in the sunshine.

Laval, fallen into the vale of years, stood stiffly to attention. There was a flutter as of wings in his old head. Youth, glory and the zest of living had come back.

The Emperor passed swiftly between the lines of his guard towards the stone steps where a king waited to do him homage before a crowd that sobbed and cheered.

§ 7

‘Colonel, move your men to the right.’

‘Sir!’

Colonel d’Haugeranville saluted with his drawn sabre and the regiment of cuirassiers, at his word of command, moved as one man to take the coveted place on the right of the line.

Talleyrand watched the scene from an open carriage, sitting beside de Canouville, the handsome Prefect of the Palace. The cuirassiers on their black horses wheeled and changed position at an even trot. Napoleon was twenty paces distant. He too was on horseback, with Soult and Berthier in attendance.

Talleyrand noted with approval that he was wearing across his colonel's uniform the blue ribbon of the Order of St. Andrew of Russia.

The cuirassiers had passed and, from somewhere to the left, the trumpets of the massed bands made soldiers' music. Talleyrand closed his eyes, but opened them at a movement from his companion. De Canouville sighed. His face showed signs of strain.

'Pray that everything may go as it should,' he said.

Talleyrand closed his eyes again.

'We have done what we can, my dear prefect, to ensure that His Majesty shall behave like an Emperor. Let us hope that our pains have not been wasted.'

Meanwhile the Emperor, between his two marshals, but a little in advance of them, was trotting down the road and Talleyrand in the open carriage was jerked forward. He pushed away from his neck the short heavy velvet cloak where it irked him.

'It's all very fine, very fine indeed. I think the Emperor is pleased,' muttered de Canouville beside him.

Talleyrand did not answer. His mind was not on the coming meeting of the Emperors, but on what lay beyond it. How fortunate that his old friend the Princess of Turm and Taxis should be at hand. He had much in common with the Princess. The Princess loved a political mystery and even more she loved a man. He had offered to meet all her necessities. To his relief, for the Princess was notoriously exacting, she had already made her own arrangements to be supplied with the commodity of which she stood most in need. She liked her lovers to be young and on the whole preferred simplicity to experience. The mystery he would himself supply in generous measure; for her

lodging in Erfurt would be neutral ground for his unofficial meetings with the Czar, and that very night she would be waiting beside her tea-cups. Alexander would need advice in dealing with Napoleon, and already it had been conveyed to him that no one was better qualified for the purpose than Talleyrand himself.

Talleyrand looked aside at his companion. De Canouville was silent but alert, following anxiously every detail of the pageant. They passed through Ottstedt. The village was decorated with green branches. A triumphal arch, with two crowns and two eagles upon it, leaned perilously towards them and a man came forward with a ladder to straighten it against the return.

'That's bad,' muttered de Canouville. 'I hope His Majesty did not notice it.'

Talleyrand settled back again in his corner of the carriage.

'Upon my word, Prince, you take all this very coolly.'

There was a note of admiration in de Canouville's voice.

Talleyrand smiled indifferently.

'There they are!'

De Canouville pointed ahead, and Talleyrand, for all his affectation of detachment, felt his pulse quicken. The carriage, in accordance with previous orders, had wheeled suddenly from the road into a green field. The footman sprang to lower the steps. Talleyrand, settling his cloak, stepped slowly to the ground, leaning on the man's shoulder. A hundred yards to the front of them, escorted by a company of French Dragoons, appeared a coach, drawn by eight magnificent bays. The outriders were in green, the Duke of Weimar's men. The French Dragoons, forming the Czar's

escort of honour, wheeled to right and left of the road and halted. Their sabres flashed as they came to the salute. Berthier was standing at his master's stirrup.

'I think we should go a little further forward,' suggested de Canouville.

Talleyrand allowed himself to be led a few paces along the road. The coach had halted and a man was stepping down. He was above medium height and on his breast shone the Imperial Order of the Grand Eagle. The two Imperial figures, one half a head shorter than the other, drew near and stood alone together in the sunlight. Then each raised his arms and they formally embraced. Talleyrand watched them gravely, leaning on his stick. The smell of hot leather and sweating horses was in his nostrils, and Lannes, short and spare on a bright chestnut, was coming towards him.

Lannes saluted formally.

'His Majesty is about to make the presentations,' he said.

Talleyrand walked down the road until he stood a pace behind the Emperor.

'My brother,' said Napoleon as he came up, 'may I present my Grand Chamberlain, the Prince of Benevento.'

Talleyrand, bowing, caught a glimpse of a red face, with light blue eyes and a mouth that wore a formal smile. He bent over the Czar's hand.

'It is a long time since we met.'

The voice of the Czar was soft compared with the metallic accent of the Emperor.

Talleyrand straightened himself.

'I am deeply honoured,' he said, 'that Your Majesty should remember me.'

Napoleon waved him imperiously aside.

'My Prefect of the Palace, who is responsible for your comfort,' he said, beckoning to de Canouville.

Talleyrand, leaning on his stick, watched the scene.

The two Emperors turned away and a groom brought forward a horse for Alexander. Napoleon waited for him to mount and, a moment later, they rode off side by side, the guard of honour under the command of Philip de Ségur falling in behind them.

The attention of Talleyrand was diverted. A man in Russian court dress had approached him. It was the Foreign Minister, Count Roumanzoff. Talleyrand bowed.

'It is an honour to meet so distinguished a colleague,' said Count Roumanzoff.

Talleyrand raised a deprecating hand.

'Count, you overwhelm me,' he murmured.

He looked round to where Champagny, Minister of External Relations, waited beside them.

'But I am no longer of the mystery,' continued Talleyrand with a smile. 'I leave you in more exalted company.'

He indicated Champagny who had pushed nervously between them.

'My dear Count, if you will be so kind, my carriage is waiting.'

A tall figure, who had watched this encounter from a short distance, came slowly forward as Champagny and Count Roumanzoff entered the carriage.

'We have been omitted from the protocol,' said the newcomer. 'Please allow me to present myself.'

'The Grand Duke Constantine, is it not?' said Talleyrand with a bow.

The Grand Duke also bowed.

'I am to have the pleasure of your company to Erfurt,' he said.

‘It is a good omen,’ responded Talleyrand. ‘We meet without formality. I hope we may continue to do so.’

§ 8

The sun shone from an unblemished sky. There was no heat in it as yet, for it was still early morning, a little past seven o’clock. Felix paused at the end of the alley. To one side of it was the brown stone wall of the house of the Princess Turm and Taxis.

Felix, before entering the alley, looked up and down the main street. The only person in sight was the sentry in front of the Czar’s house a hundred yards away, but, even as Felix paused, the Sergeant of the Guard appeared suddenly round the corner of the Treibelresidenz, the gold eagle in the front of his bearskin catching the light as he stepped out with the reliefs.

Felix stood a moment longer before crossing the street to the lodging he shared with other members of the Imperial suite. A great waggon piled high with hay was coming into view. Felix slipped after it quickly and kept well within its shadow. De Najac might boast of his humbler satisfactions, but the favours of a princess, though they had come with ease, must be worn with discretion.

Felix paused again. He was now at the entrance to the lane which led to the park of the Prince Primate’s Palace. To pass the sentry would not be difficult; just a small tip to cover his truancy and then he would slip up the stairs to his attic under the high pitched roof where he would be alone for a cool hour before meeting the others.

He turned into the lane. There was dew on the spiders’ webs spread in grey nets over the grass in the

garden behind the Palace which he was now approaching. But the freshness of the morning was still strange. The night had been too vivid for him easily to apprehend the day. He saw again the heavy fall of the tester curtains swaying into place behind him as he stood by the bed. Candles burned on the table beside him. He stretched out his hand to move them from the curtains, but the soft voice of the Princess protested: 'I can bear candlelight. You, too, if I am not to be disappointed.'

Still she came in poignant memory between him and the sun. Again he picked up the branched silver candlestick and carried it carefully within the curtains and set it down upon the table and again he turned in fancy to see her lying upon the bed, with her eyes half shut but bright as steel beneath the lids and her nightdress tumbled on the thick rug at his feet.

The candles faded, giving place to the garden in daylight. This drift of scent came from behind the small gate in the iron railings, beyond which a bush of late roses was growing. It drove from his senses the spell of the lilac perfume that had clung about him all night, with the sour smell of the candles as one by one they had guttered.

Just inside the gate stood the sentry. His musket was against his left shoulder. His shako with the red plume was slightly awry. Felix noted by the numbers on his collar that he belonged to the 17th Light Infantry. The sentry stiffened at sight of him and Felix advanced a hand in which a five-franc piece was shining. The sentry grinned and nodded with understanding as Felix, without a word, slipped past.

His encounter with the sentry had driven out all thoughts of the night, and Felix, breathing deeply of the morning, went quickly towards a door which stood

ajar at the top of the stone stairs which led up to it from the garden. He had barely set foot on the stairs when a door on the first floor was flung wide and Philip de Ségur appeared.

'Felix,' he said, 'we've been combing the town for you. Where have you been? Lying up with a piece of pink flesh, I suppose.'

Felix reddened and swore softly.

'What's the trouble?' he asked.

De Ségur looked at him.

'Duroc will tell you,' he answered grimly.

'Duroc!' exclaimed Felix, 'what can he want with me at this hour?'

His mind was now swept clean for what the morning would bring.

'He asked for you at midnight and he is waiting for you now in his room.'

Felix sped across the landing at the top of the broad stairs, knocked at a door patterned with bronze ivy leaves and entered instantly, not waiting for the order.

The Grand Marshal of the Palace was sitting in the corner of the room by the window and the sun picked out in dazzling white the neat piles of open letters and despatches which covered more than half the desk.

'Where have you been?'

The voice was short and cold. Felix came to a halt a yard or two from the desk. His cheeks were flaming.

'I'm sorry, sir. I did not spend the night in my quarters.'

'I know that,' snapped Duroc. 'You should have asked leave to be absent. The Emperor's pages must submit to the discipline of His Majesty's court.'

He paused and looked sternly at Felix.

'You are new to the service. I have not informed His Majesty. You will pay a fine of fifty francs.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Duroc waved a hand.

'And if this happens again, I shall bring your conduct to the notice of the Emperor.'

'Yes, sir.'

Duroc picked up a folded and sealed paper.

'You are to take this despatch at once to Madame Walewska,' he said, 'and you are to ride post. His Majesty believes you to be already thirty miles upon the road.'

'I will ride day and night, sir.'

'Have you money?'

'Enough to get me to Paris, sir.'

Duroc seized a sheet of paper, scribbled a sentence on it and handed it to Felix.

'Draw what is necessary for your return to Erfurt from the Accountants Department at the Tuileries.'

Felix made to go.

'One moment.'

Felix turned. Duroc was smiling.

'Next time you had better confide in me, unless you want the whole Palace to be barking at your heels.'

A quarter of an hour later Felix was moving at a smart canter along the Paris road. His pride, in retrospect, was hurt less by the reprimand he had received from Duroc than by a feeling that he had not played quite so fine a part in the night's doings as he had imagined. It was clear to him in recollection that the Princess, though she had listened kindly as he talked of his present duties and hopes for the future, had not been really interested. She did not seem to care who or what he was. He had served to pass

the time—adequately, he hoped.

Yet, why should he complain or feel resentful? Fate had treated him kindly, though now he must leave his love untimely without even an opportunity to acquaint her with his mission. When he returned, if his duties permitted, would she, he wondered, have found another to serve her turn?

Changing horses every three hours and riding through the night, he was at Frankfurt by noon on the next day.

The posting-station was at the inn of the Golden Eagle. He threw himself from the saddle and turned to the ostler, intending to ask for a fresh mount immediately. But his eye was caught by a familiar figure crossing the stable-yard. He stared hard at the man to make sure.

‘Joachim,’ he shouted.

The fellow turned, his ugly Polish face split from ear to ear with a grin of recognition.

‘What are you doing here?’ demanded Felix.

Joachim pointed to the inn door.

‘My lady,’ he said, ‘is on the way to Erfurt.’

Felix took him by the arm. His spirits rose. He might now deliver his message and be again at Erfurt within forty-eight hours.

He walked rapidly across the yard and entered the inn. At the foot of the stairs stood the innkeeper’s wife, her hair tied up in a napkin.

‘Where is the lady with the Polish servants,’ he asked, ‘who arrived just now?’

‘She said that she did not wish to be disturbed,’ answered the woman, looking at him doubtfully.

‘Where is the lady?’ repeated Felix. ‘I must see her at once. I have a letter for her.’

The landlady, after hesitating a moment, turned and

led him up the staircase. She knocked at a door on the landing.

'Come in,' said a remembered voice.

'It is a gentleman, madam,' said the landlady, through the door. 'He says that he has a letter for you.'

Felix entered the room, which was low and broad, its small windows wide to the street. Walewska was standing by an oak table in the centre. The hood of her travelling cape was thrown back.

'Madam,' explained Felix. 'This is a happy meeting. I was on the way to Paris with a letter from His Majesty.'

'Welcome, Monsieur Felix.'

She smiled as she took the letter.

She broke the seal and moved so that the light from the window fell on the page. Felix waited. She turned with a rustle.

'I want to get to Erfurt as quickly as possible,' she said. 'Will you return with me, Monsieur Felix?'

'At your service, madam.'

§ 9

'A little more to the left, Your Majesty. Thank you.'

Constant passed the razor rapidly down the olive cheek. The Emperor shifted a little in his chair, raised a hand and passed it across his chin.

'That will do very well,' he said.

The valet moved to the silver basin and, dipping a towel in warm water, passed it lightly across Napoleon's face and then applied the eau-de-Cologne. Napoleon lay back, closing his eyes.

There came a movement from the door. Constant turned quickly. It was time for the Emperor's coffee and he would take the tray from Roustan. But a tall figure stood in the doorway in the uniform of the Russian Imperial Guard.

'May I come in?'

Constant stood back, bowing low as Napoleon rose quickly from his chair, throwing the towel with which his face had been half covered upon the floor.

'Your Majesty allows me the small as well as the grand entry,' smiled the Czar.

'It is charming of Your Majesty to call so early,'—Napoleon's voice was gay. 'Have you decided yet what we shall do today?'

Alexander sat on the edge of the iron bed.

'Do, my friend,' he exclaimed. 'I am overcome with entertainment. It is inexhaustible. May we never rest?'

Napoleon jerked at the white cloth tied beneath his chin. Constant hastened to remove it and turned to pick up the cambric shirt, only to find Alexander was holding it out to him. Constant again bowed low as he took the shirt from the Czar.

'This is a remarkable bed,' the Czar was saying.

Napoleon, thrusting his head through the shirt, nodded.

'It has been with me since Marengo,' he said.

'Most convenient. It would seem to fold into nothing.'

Napoleon nodded over Constant who was bending to do up the buttons of his shirt.

'Constant,' he whispered, 'cause an exactly similar bed to be set up in His Russian Majesty's quarters.'

'Very good, sir,' said Constant.

The Czar had risen from the bed and was wandering round the room. He turned as Constant began to adjust Napoleon's cravat.

'That is a remarkably talented troop from the Français,' he said.

'Talma is a fine actor,' consented Napoleon. 'So is St. Prix.'

'The actresses, too, are excellent,' murmured the Czar, looking thoughtfully at the tips of his fingers.

'Your Majesty admires them?'

Napoleon, cravat adjusted, rose from his chair.

'Very different from our Russian trollops,' said Alexander.

He hesitated, looking doubtfully at Napoleon.

'I did not see last night,' he continued, 'the most charming member of the company.'

'Mlle. Bourgoïn?'

Constant, his hand on the Emperor's white waistcoat, paused. The Czar was a little flushed. All Erfurt had watched Mlle. Bourgoïn spreading her nets. So that little affair had come to a head. He supposed he would have to make the necessary arrangements. Or would they be entrusted to Duroc?

'Mlle. Bourgoïn, that is the name. I confess that I find her most attractive.'

Napoleon smiled upon his friend.

'I would advise Your Majesty to look elsewhere,' he said gravely.

The flush on Alexander's cheeks deepened.

'Is the lady virtuous?' he enquired.

Napoleon laughed outright.

'The lady would be delighted to receive you. But listen: the post leaves Erfurt tomorrow and in five days all Paris would know all about Your Majesty from head to foot.'

There was a moment's silence. The Czar spoke with hesitation.

'Your Majesty speaks feelingly. Suppose I disregard the warning. There are risks that are worth the taking.'

Napoleon looked up at his tall companion.

'There are risks of another kind. Give me your ear,' and, as Alexander bent his head, he whispered something that Constant was unable to catch.

Alexander made a slight grimace and, moving away, began fingering the articles on Napoleon's dressing-table.

'I am glad to say,' continued the Czar on a different note, 'that your brother and mine are now the best of friends. Constantine tells me that Jerome is a delightful companion.'

Napoleon laughed.

'Two young fools together,' he replied. 'I hear that they spend their time in student pranks. Only the other night before last they ran the whole way down High Street ringing at every door. I shall never teach Jerome to behave like a king.'

'You might have spared him the burden, my friend. You must feel at times that there may be too many kings in a family.'

Alexander was fingering the articles on the dressing-table. Napoleon shot him a swift and searching glance.

'You come very near to a subject we have soon to discuss,' he said incisively. 'I allude to my brother Joseph, King of Spain. His position has yet to be recognised in Vienna. But this is no time for politics.'

With an abrupt change of manner he took Alexander affectionately by the arm.

'You cannot imagine what pleasure I take in this

visit,' he continued. 'I wish you could have spared the time to come to Paris. There I could give you a more adequate welcome.'

The Czar was still busy at the dressing-table.

'This is a charming dressing-case,' he said.

'You like it?'

Napoleon came forward. Constant followed, carrying his coat.

'It is beautiful work,' said Alexander.

'It is by Biennais.'

'Charming,' repeated Alexander.

Constant closed with his master and helped him on with his coat. Napoleon turned his head. Constant caught the Emperor's eye and nodded secretly. The dressing-case in silver gilt would go with the bedstead to Alexander.

'Ready at last,' exclaimed Napoleon, as Constant handed him a white cambric handkerchief.

'I intended to work this morning,' said Alexander. 'Roumantzoff is waiting for me.'

'No politics today. Champagne shall deal with Roumantzoff, or Talleyrand perhaps.'

Napoleon slipped his arm as he spoke into that of Alexander, who was looking away from him. The Czar's face had upon it a look almost of compunction.

'Your Majesty has every confidence in Talleyrand,' he said softly.

'Talleyrand serves me faithfully, provided he may also serve himself. It would be unreasonable to ask more of so intelligent a man.'

Roustan flung open the door and the two Emperors walked into the wide ante-room. Constant watched them as they went.

'Matey—these Emperlors, are they not?' came the lisping voice of the Mameluke in his ear.

§ 10

Talleyrand, with a lace handkerchief, wiped the small sweat from his forehead. It was hot in the theatre, for the candelabra were blazing with waxen lights and the auditorium, built to hold about three hundred people, was somehow packed to contain nearly twice that number: kings, princes, grand dukes, ministers, generals, envoys extraordinary. Below him, for he had a seat in the small line of boxes above the floor of the house, was the parterre of kings which the Emperor had promised to Talma. They sat elbow to elbow with their consorts. The only space where it was possible to move hand or foot was the enclosure immediately in front of the stage, separated by a low balustrade from the pit, where stood the two gilded chairs which had been set for the Emperors. On the right, just behind the two chairs, the Kings of Bavaria and Saxony were talking to the Prince Primate, and, immediately below Talleyrand, a loud snort betrayed where the King of Württemberg was blowing his nose. Prince William of Prussia was talking with an air of secrecy to the Grand Duke Constantine. Talleyrand smiled. He had no desire to be eavesdropping. Prussia might now be disregarded.

The man beside him, in white silk breeches and blue coat, with a high forehead and sensitive mouth, was Baron Vincent, the Austrian Envoy, with whom he had much, and hoped to have more, in common. Vincent's hand was on his elbow, and Talleyrand saw that the King and Queen of Westphalia, his host and hostess of the evening, were pushing their way into the box. He rose and bowed low as they entered.

Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, seemed anxious.

'I hope I am not late,' he said rapidly.

'Their Imperial Majesties, sir, have not yet entered the theatre,' replied Talleyrand smoothly.

There was much pushing about of chairs as the five of them adjusted themselves to a cubic capacity designed for three.

'Damned hot in here,' said Jerome. 'What is the play?'

'*Cinna*, Your Majesty.'

'My brother would persuade the world that a Frenchman never unbuttons.'

He turned to the Queen.

'Don't let 'em catch me nodding, my dear.'

Jerome waved a familiar hand to the Grand Duke Constantine below. Talleyrand smiled. Those two had spent several evenings together. Each had discovered in the other an unexpected sense of humour. Last night, dressed as night watchmen, they had broken the windows of the Prince Primate.

Talleyrand was partly hidden by the gold curtains. Vincent, raising his hand, whispered:

'Tomorrow, if it is convenient.'

'At eleven, perhaps,' responded Talleyrand.

'At eleven.'

The murmur of the house was succeeded by a louder stir as the audience with difficulty rose to its feet. Two figures in uniform were coming down the central gangway towards the gilded chairs.

There was a high colour in Alexander's cheeks. His eyes sparkled like those of a man well pleased and he made a fine figure in his uniform of the Imperial Guard. Napoleon was in his usual habit of blue and white as a colonel of the Grenadiers of the Guard. He too was evidently in high good humour and he paused a moment before sitting down to take the King of

Württemberg familiarly by the ear and to say something which caused that monarch to smile obsequiously.

Talleyrand drew back further into the shadow of the box. His hand went instinctively to the pocket of his coat. Napoleon had that morning commanded him to prepare a draft treaty of alliance and friendship with Alexander, to be mainly directed against England. The Emperor had written out in his own, almost undecipherable hand:

‘His Majesty, the Emperor of the French, and His Majesty, the Emperor of All the Russias, desirous of drawing ever closer and rendering ever more durable the alliance which unites them, and undertaking to reach an understanding between themselves as soon as is necessary on the new means to be used in the attack to be directed against England, their common enemy and the enemy of the continent of Europe, have resolved to lay down in a special convention the principles which they have determined to follow.’

‘Principles’ was his master’s word. ‘They commit me to nothing,’ he had observed with the sly Italian look which he reserved for his diplomacy.

The Emperor’s jottings had since been amplified into twelve articles. The article that had pleased the Emperor most had been one concerning the occupation by Russia of the Austrian provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia. ‘It is the apple of discord, my dear Talleyrand,’ he had said. ‘Alexander will accept the suggestion and Austria will then be as much his enemy as mine.’

Talleyrand glanced aside at Alexander. He would be seeing him that night over the tea-cups. The Princess Turm and Taxis was expecting them after the play. Alexander must be warned. It would be well perhaps to bring matters to a head that night. But he must go warily with the Czar, and he had yet to

make certain of the position in Vienna.

From the shelter of the curtains he looked down upon the two Emperors. They were seated very close together; it looked as though Alexander's hand was on the Emperor's knee. Napoleon was almost lover-like in his attentions. Caution was necessary. He had always to reckon with the spell which Napoleon could exercise at will on all men, from the soldier who died for him in a ditch to the King seated in a theatre for his pleasure. Napoleon could be charming when he had his way. All this, however, would pass. The Imperial brethren might laugh together, make each other costly presents, choose in turn who should give the pass-word of the day, but all that would not satisfy Alexander's ambitions in Persia or Turkey, or remove Napoleon's fear of the Austrian menace.

The voice of Talma now filled the theatre, and Talleyrand turned his attention to the stage.

'La perfidie est noble envers la tyrannie.'

The line came magnificently from the actor's lips. Talleyrand saw Alexander shift a moment in his gilded chair. Their eyes met, but the Czar quickly turned away his head.

The lips of Talleyrand moved silently: *'La perfidie est noble envers la tyrannie.'* The sentiment was apt. It would be his justification to posterity and his excuse to the Czar, who, like all weaklings, feared his conscience and desired to cut a fine, respectable figure in the eyes of the world and in his own.

The line had passed unnoticed by the company. Yet to how many of them might it not apply besides himself: princes, kings, grand dukes, counts, barons, excellencies—all obsequious but ready to turn their splendid coats when the occasion should present itself.

Talleyrand looked down upon them with a faint disgust. Not one of them, for all their rich clothes and their jewels, their horses, their pages and their mistresses, dared so much as speak a word till they had received their cue from the little Corsican lieutenant of artillery who had climbed so high. In the perfidy of these men was nothing noble. It was no more than a barren acquiescence in events they had no courage to control.

La perfidie est noble. . . . He must think carefully what he should say to the Czar that evening. The time was ripe. That swift, uneasy glance, which Alexander had just thrown at him, gave to him his cue.

Talleyrand, an hour later, walking alone towards the house of the Princess Turm and Taxis, wondered whether he had not waited perhaps too long. Time was growing short and the two Emperors were inseparable. Their behaviour towards one another was that of two schoolboys on holiday together. Napoleon with his eager charm might yet succeed in his design and hurry the Czar into some fatal act.

Talleyrand, handing his cloak and hat in silence to a footman, began slowly to climb the stairs to the drawing-room. So far Napoleon had managed things all his own way. But there was still more than a week to run and much might be done in a week.

The Princess rose to greet him as he entered. Talleyrand, bending over her hand, felt suddenly sure of the event. The room was warm and comfortable. It had a cosy, inhabited look. By the leaping fire bubbled a samovar of silver gilt. Sèvres cups were set out on a low table and a hint of lilac hung in the warm air. Talleyrand sighed with satisfaction as he settled himself in a low chair near the fire.

'Not yet,' said the Princess, as Talleyrand looked for the Czar, 'but I am expecting him at any minute.'

He saw Napoleon home after the play.'

'That, dear Princess, was an hour ago. But they are always long in parting.'

The Princess smiled.

'The love-birds,' she sighed. 'I think they look simply sweet, sitting side by side in their golden chairs. What was the play?'

'*Cinna*,' answered Talleyrand. 'There were no incidents, as when *Œdipe* was played. You should have been there that night, Princess. Our little comedy went very well indeed. *L'amitié d'un grand homme est un bienfait des dieux*. Alexander took the hand of Napoleon and we all applauded so loudly that several kings woke up and wondered what it was all about.'

'The Czar is very impressionable,' said the Princess.

'He is like a pretty woman without the excuse of sex or prettiness.'

'Poor fellow,' sighed the Princess. 'With you pushing him one way and the Emperor pushing him the other, he is not likely to have a very pleasant time. It is amusing to think that the destinies of Europe may depend on which of you will push the harder.'

At that moment the door was opened and the Czar announced. He came forward with a smile, his fair hair and florid complexion gleaming in the candlelight.

'For my cup of tea before going to bed, dear Princess,' he said, bowing over her hand and kissing it.

'But of course, Majesty. And, by a strange coincidence, here for his cup of tea is the Prince de Talleyrand.'

Talleyrand had risen and was also bowing. The Czar nodded pleasantly and waved them back to their seats, sitting himself on a chair opposite the fire and stretching a hand to the blaze.

'Your Majesty enjoyed the play?' said Talleyrand politely, as the Princess began to pour tea for the Czar.

'Very fine,' said the Czar. 'Your French Alexandrines are like strong wine. Some people they excite to frenzy. Others ...'

He paused.

'Yes, Majesty?' said the Princess.

'Well, I looked behind me this evening. There was little sign of frenzy. Many preferred to listen with their eyes shut. This is delicious tea, Princess. I can't get tea like this in Petersburg.'

'If Your Majesty would be pleased to accept some of me.'

The Czar laughed. He looked sidelong at Talleyrand.

'I seem to be always accepting gifts,' he said. 'Your Emperor is the most generous of men.'

'Has he given back the Oder fortresses yet?'

The question came dry and clear. The Czar moved uneasily.

'He has removed nearly all his troops.'

'But we remain, I fancy, in Stettin, Glogau and Kustrin. Perhaps Your Majesty has no great interest in Prussia.'

'There is not much left of Prussia to be interested in,' said the Czar, staring into the fire.

He looked across at the Princess.

'I am sorry, madam,' he added quickly. 'I was forgetting for the moment that your sister was queen of that unhappy country.'

'Queen of a tattered realm,' said the Princess with a becoming droop of her wide mouth.

'What was I to do?' demanded the Czar impatiently. 'You must admit that Frederic William has behaved like a perfect fool. The whole Jena

campaign was one long blunder from beginning to end. You could scarcely expect Napoleon, after so pitiable an exhibition, to be magnanimous.'

'Yet Napoleon can be generous,' murmured Talleyrand.

The Czar looked at him inquiringly.

'With other people's property,' continued Talleyrand.

There was an uncomfortable silence. The Czar sipped his tea with an air of displeasure. He seemed this evening to be even less than usual in the mood for unpleasant truths.

'At Tilsit,' ventured Talleyrand, 'he had his way with Prussia. Now it is the turn of someone else.'

'Austria, you mean?'

'As Your Majesty observes.'

'There can be no question of a further partitioning of Austria.'

'Napoleon has now no need of provinces either to keep or to give to his friends. From Austria he needs at this moment no more than a simple gesture. But he means to have it and he intends that you shall help him in the matter.'

The Czar continued to stare moodily at the flames.

'Your Emperor has been charming,' he said at last.

'I can refuse him nothing within reason.'

'My master can be very charming,' answered Talleyrand. 'I should be the last to deny it.'

Alexander looked over his cup distastefully.

'There is always a sneer beneath your compliments, Monsieur de Talleyrand. You mean that Napoleon uses his charm when it suits his purpose to do so.'

'Do me the honour to remember that I have known the Emperor Napoleon for many years, ever since the days when he was First Consul.'

‘ In plain terms, your Emperor would make a fool of me.’

Talleyrand looked quickly at the Czar.

‘ Why did my master come to Erfurt? I think, if Your Majesty will reflect a moment, you will see that it was precisely in order that he might have opportunity of exercising his charm upon yourself.’

‘ I should therefore be flattered.’

The Czar’s tone was petulant.

‘ Such flattery, sir, is dangerous.’

The Czar put down his cup and thrust it across the table.

‘ What, then, does he want of me? ’ he exclaimed.

‘ He needs above all things your influence with Austria. Not only must Austria be kept quiet. She must acquiesce in his Spanish policy. It is vital for him that the Emperor Francis should recognise King Joseph. My master will certainly press this point upon you very shortly.

‘ He has already opened the matter, but not as a major issue.’

‘ For him the point is essential. He will therefore approach it as merely an incident in his policy. He applies the principles of military strategy to his management of men. He strikes where and when the blow is least expected. Cross him in this matter and you will see what happens.’

The Czar fidgeted in his chair.

‘ What in God’s name do you expect me to do? Why should I cross Napoleon? He is master of Europe.’

‘ For the moment,’ said Talleyrand quietly.

‘ You have no reason to think that he will not be master tomorrow? ’ said the Czar sharply.

Talleyrand ever so slightly lifted his right shoulder.

‘Has Your Majesty fully considered the situation in Spain?’ he asked. ‘Evidence of the strength or weakness of the Emperor does not lie on the surface. It cannot be easily measured. The effect of recent events upon the people of France is incalculable. Napoleon has been Emperor for only four years and that is but a short time for our people to accept his system as a necessary part of their national inheritance.’

The Czar held out his hand for the cup which the Princess had refilled.

‘Monsieur de Talleyrand is right,’ she said as he took the cup. ‘Would it be really wise for Your Majesty to commit yourself too openly?’

Talleyrand smiled at the Princess.

‘Our hostess,’ he said, ‘is also, it seems, a man of the world. Men of the world are not influenced by a parade of friendship and affection. A man of the world consults his own interests. He waits until he is sure of his ground or until action is forced upon him.’

The Czar was also smiling faintly.

‘Tell me, Talleyrand,’ he said, ‘what do you conceive to be my real interests in this matter?’

‘Surely, sir, your present interests counsel you at least to wait for the result of the Spanish adventure before publishing yourself as a declared supporter of French dominion. Spain will not be easily subdued.’

‘No one has yet succeeded in arms against Napoleon. I know that to my cost.’

‘His task in Spain is not to win a battle, but to conquer a nation. May I speak plainly to Your Majesty?’

‘Of course.’

‘Then let me counsel you to avoid at all costs an open breach with Vienna. From Your Majesty’s point

of view it is unnecessary. For the moment you hold the scales in Europe. You have only to wait.'

The Czar started to his feet so that the tea-cups rattled. He moved towards the fire. Talleyrand could not see his eyes, but suddenly he turned.

'So I am to resist the famous charm. Is that what you mean?'

'I would at least advise Your Majesty to test its quality. Hold fast on the Austrian issue and see what happens. I foresee that, if my master cannot win you with kindness, he will try other methods.'

'As for example?'

'Napoleon can be charming to suit his purpose. He can lose his temper with equal effect.'

Talleyrand, looking up, saw the Czar's gaze fixed upon him. The high forehead was wrinkled and the eyes perplexed.

'Why do you give me this advice?' he asked.

Talleyrand met his gaze serenely.

'Your Majesty was at the play this evening. He will perhaps recall the line: *La perfidie est noble envers la tyrannie.*'

Alexander smiled uneasily.

'That,' he said 'is hardly a sentiment which I can applaud as Emperor of Russia. It would seem too like inviting a rebellion.'

Talleyrand rose slowly to his feet and flung out his right hand.

'Then I will put it differently. The French are civilised; their Sovereign is not. The Sovereign of Russia is civilized; her people are not. Therefore the Sovereign of Russia must be the ally of the people of France.'

Talleyrand bowed slightly to the Czar and looked at him steadily.

There was a long silence. Alexander at last jerked his head and turned abruptly, almost with the awkwardness of Napoleon himself.

‘Thank you, Princess, for this most charming reception,’ he said and kissed her hand.

‘Good night, Talleyrand,’ he continued. ‘I will think very carefully over what you have said.’

§ 11

‘Late again. Why are you never in time?’

De Najac, crowding wilfully against Felix, elbowed him into the artificial hedge of cut and laced boughs which led to the hunting pavilion.

But Felix was too distracted to take offence. His mind was on Walewska and how he was to acquaint Duroc or the Emperor himself with her arrival.

It had, of course, been impossible to find a room for her in Erfurt, but inquiries at the Leather Huntsman had elicited the fact that its host, Carl Schaeffer, had a brother who kept the village inn at Ottstedt where a lodging might be found and at Ottstedt Walewska was now installed.

Thence he had returned to Erfurt, only to be informed by de Ségur that Duroc was with the Emperor and that the Emperor and the Czar were already on their way to attend a hunt staged by the Duke of Saxe Weimar in the Forest of Ettersburg. Then and there he had put on his hunting clothes, and five minutes later, buttoning his tunic and with a gorgeous plumed hat awry on his head, he had set out for the forest. Only his determined air and the fact that he was well mounted had got him through the huge press of people surrounding the wide open space wherein the hunt was to take place.

He was thus in no mood to concern himself overmuch with the peevish greetings of de Najac. Already the two Emperors had arrived on horseback with their suites, all in hunting green. Felix hastily joined the other pages of the Emperor and followed the train of Imperial dignitaries headed by Berthier, the Grand Veneur de France, with Soult and Lannes immediately behind him. They moved together in a compact, official crowd towards the pavilion, where already the Duke of Saxe Weimar was coming forward to do the honours.

Felix found himself in the section of the huge tent reserved for the suite of the French Emperor. It was a lofty erection, upheld by the trunks of oak trees, and the front of it was decorated with red painted fruit and small palms.

The Emperors for a moment were separated from their suites by a canvas curtain. Felix began to breathe more easily and to look about him. One side of the pavilion was open to the grass which stretched smoothly away, right and left, under the strong October sun. The clearing was surrounded by majestic trees, and immediately opposite, just out of shot-gun range, waited the trumpeters and hornblowers of the hunt. A little man moved quickly from the pavilion and the horns began to blow. Baron de Fritsch, huntsman to the Duke, in whose charge all the arrangements had been placed, had given the signal.

Where was Duroc? Felix ran his eye quickly round the tent, but could not see him. Should he slip away and look for him? Berthier appeared suddenly from behind the curtain.

‘All pages,’ he said sharply, ‘are to bear a hand with the Emperor’s guns.’

Felix followed his colleagues into the centre half of

the pavilion and received, with each of them, a fowling-piece belonging to the Emperor.

Napoleon, he found, was not ten feet away from him, in eager talk with the Czar. Of Duroc there was still no sign.

Felix was last in the line and, as he loaded the fowling-piece, he almost forgot his immediate purpose in the novelty of his surroundings. He was standing, with the other pages and Roustan, towards the centre of the pavilion. In front of the Emperors was a wooden balustrade, so constructed that they could rest their pieces easily upon the top of it. Beside them sat the Kings of Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg. The Duke of Saxe-Weimar, as host, was fussing in the immediate background and a little further off Lannes, Berthier and Soult formed a compact group. All were in hunting dress. As a background to the conversation in the pavilion, came the sustained murmur of the huge crowd which had collected on the hunting ground since ten o'clock that morning.

Somewhere a long call on a hunting horn sounded imperiously and, a moment later, there came a drumming of hoofs on the green grass outside. The voices of the crowd died as when a door is shut upon a crowded room. A couple of stags were driven into view, so close that Felix could see the whites of their frightened eyes. At the same moment a shot cracked from the pavilion, followed, a second later, by a second. One of the stags halted abruptly, throwing up its splendid head. Blood poured from the dark throat; a shudder passed through the lean, graceful body. The eyes turned upward; the forelegs made a convulsive bound; the animal fell sideways and lay kicking.

'Wake up,' came a sharp voice in the ear of Felix.
'The Emperor is waiting.'

Felix took an empty fowling-piece for reloading and proffered the piece which was ready for firing. Another stag came past and then some three or four. Felix saw the blood-red nostrils of the leader as it sped within eight feet of the Czar. Alexander fired and the stag rolled over. Several other shots came cracking from a pavilion further down the line.

'A fine ten-pointer, Your Imperial Majesty,' exclaimed the Duke of Saxe-Weimar in high excitement, but his voice was drowned in a blare of trumpets and cymbals.

'A monarch by a monarch slain,' smiled Napoleon.

Alexander sat back in his chair and picked up another loaded piece. He, too, was smiling and his face was flushed.

'It is the first ten-pointer that I ever shot in my life,' he said. 'I am a little near-sighted, as you know. Never before have the stags been driven so close.'

The crash of cymbals ceased. Men in green and russet crowned with oak leaves rushed forward and dragged away the dead game. Three wounded stags were put out of their agony with the hunting knife. Small drinking horns were handed round and the two Emperors pledged each other in champagne.

'Are Your Imperial Majesties ready to begin again?' said the Duke of Saxe-Weimar.

Napoleon smiled at Alexander and nodded.

Once more the horns were sounded, a different call this time, more prolonged and lilting. Once more came the drumming of hoofs. More stags appeared and with them hares and a streak of red that flushed ahead faster than any stag.

A fox, noted Felix, as the Emperor's piece cracked.

The fox rolled over. Felix was busy again reloading.

'The Emperor has shot a fox,' said de Najac proudly in his ear.

'Emperlor, velly fine shot.'

Black Roustan was smiling at the pages.

The slaughter continued for an hour. The pavilion, though the sides were open, began to stink of burnt powder, and from the soaked grass in front of it rose the hot smell of fresh spilled blood. At four o'clock Napoleon rose abruptly and put a hand on the Duke of Saxe-Weimar's shoulder.

'A very pleasant entertainment,' he said, 'but the light is failing and I am thinking of your ball this evening.'

'You are too kind, too flattering, Majesty.'

Napoleon turned away. The huntsmen were on the grass laying out the game. The dead creatures lay side by side in long rows, counted in a high thin voice by Baron de Fritsch.

Napoleon turned. The last fowling-piece he had used was still in his hand. Roustan moved to take it, but Felix, remembering his mission, stepped forward.

'Let me,' he said urgently to the Mameluke.

Roustan seemed disinclined to yield, but Felix already had his hand on the Emperor's piece. The Emperor let it go and was about to turn away when Felix, with seeming clumsiness, dropped the weapon on the ground. Roustan, muttering some eastern oath, bent down to retrieve it. Felix leaned swiftly forward.

'Madame Walewska is at Ottstedt, sir,' he said. 'She greatly desires to see Your Majesty.'

His lips scarcely moved and only the light in the Emperor's grey eyes showed that he understood.

'I will see her tonight,' he whispered back. 'No,

that is impossible. I will see her tomorrow. Inform Duroc.'

He turned away and passed his arm through that of the Czar.

'The honours are with you, my brother,' he said. 'The best ten-pointer I have seen. Some day you must come to Compiègne or Fontainebleau. There you shall see . . .'

The voices died away as Felix drew back with his companions.

§ 12

Goethe, Minister of State, slowly made his way across the square in front of the Schloss Weimar. He paused a moment to look with interest towards the obelisk in the centre. At the foot of it stood four tripods; four men had just plunged into each a lighted torch. There arose four columns of thick aromatic smoke with a hint of flame at the base. The square was packed with people, but a broad alley, roped off and guarded with soldiers, had been kept clear for the passage of guests. A mellow light shone over the uneven roofs of the city and turned the plane trees which bordered the square into little arbours of shade.

Goethe, as he passed down the alley, was not unaware of the stir he caused. The citizens of Weimar had come to see and applaud their numerous Majesties, but he too was part of the show. Every now and then he coldly acknowledged a greeting as he turned through the gate and made his way slowly towards the grand stairs, at the foot of which the Duke, his master, would receive the Imperial visitors; but even to those on whom he smiled he seemed unusually absent. He was again to meet Napoleon. What manner of man was this who expressed in his small person the whole

meaning and essence of government? Supreme Genius? Supreme Accident of the Time? Supreme Son of Man? Master or Slave of the Event?

It was four days since he had spent that memorable hour with the Emperor at Erfurt. Napoleon had sent for him unprompted.

The crowded square was less real than the scene as it lived still freshly in the poet's mind. He saw himself again approaching the table where Napoleon had sat, with Talleyrand, Duroc, Berthier and Lannes in attendance. The Emperor had risen and with an emphatic movement, seemingly spontaneous, had thrust out a hand towards him. Gentlemen, here is a man!

Goethe, in retrospect, still wondered how sincere had been the tribute. The gesture was meant for posterity. It was a gesture of the time spirit. Political forces were transitory. The wise man acknowledged them and let them pass. They fulfilled immediate needs. But there had been genius—was it instinctive or deliberate?—in Napoleon's greeting. The man would become a legend and this would be part of it. His political system would perish, but the great contriver, who compelled each moment as it passed to serve his occasions, fulfilled the secret wish of every man to command his own destiny, and in Napoleon every man might henceforth see himself imperious and glorified. Therein lay the fascination and peril of this conspicuous adventure of the human will. Napoleon, victorious to the end, would consecrate for centuries the doctrine of power and destroy the gospel of ministry and sacrifice; and, even if he failed and fell, he would yet attract the sympathy, even the adoration, of men, to whom Lucifer, Son of the Morning, was still the brightest of the stars.

Goethe came to himself abruptly. The full frock-

coat was tight across his chest. It irked him as he began to climb the stairs. He bowed to his master, but the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, though he acknowledged the greeting with respect, was full of small affairs. It was essential that all should go well and that the Emperor should be pleased.

Goethe reached his place and stood with the other dignitaries. He had arrived only just in time, for at that moment came the cry of a trumpet. There was a renewed activity among the servants and officials, gathered round their master. Beyond the thick walls came a dull sound of cheering, which rose to a roar as the doors were flung open and two men advanced towards the group where Goethe stood, one tall and well-proportioned, the other fat and plump and, as far as one could yet see, undistinguished.

He waited for a nearer view, and saw move past him, in white and blue, a man not above five feet six inches in height, muscular and inclined to stoutness. A short neck supported a head somewhat too large in proportion to his body. The hair was brownish black, the forehead capacious above grey eyes and a high nose, a short upper lip and a round full chin. His complexion was pale, the colour of ivory, and at the moment the whole face was expressive of high good humour. Goethe leaned forward. The grey eyes flashed through and past him for a moment. There was a light yellow tinge on the iris. Then the short figure passed into the great hall.

Half an hour later, from his place half-way down the horse-shoe table, Goethe, even more silent than usual, again inspected the small figure in plain white and blue, noting with interest the cunning simplicity which distinguished him from the star-spangled company about him.

The feast was served by the Duke's huntsmen, still in the green jackets in which they had presided over the Imperial butchery of the afternoon. They were crowned with oak leaves and each separate course was announced with a flourish of trumpets. There was a great profusion of flowers on the table and the huge hall was heavy with the scent of them and the smell of food.

But Goethe saw only Napoleon, who sat at the apex of the table. For a moment during the presentations their eyes had met and Napoleon had given him a look of recognition. Was it his fancy or did the Emperor share that feeling of kinship which had seemed to run between them? Each in their way stood for something that was passing from the world, an instinctive reach after the universal in knowledge or power which the growing complexity of human life would deny to men of the new age.

He found himself straining his ears to catch the conversation. There had come a slight pause as the plates were changed.

'Heraldry,' the King of Württemberg was speaking, 'was a passion with my grandfather. Our family coat goes back to the eleventh century.'

The Grand Duke Constantine nodded solemnly.

'In Russia, we do not have coat armour,' he said, 'and I'm afraid that our heraldry is of comparatively recent date.'

A dish of venison, garnished with raisins and sliced peaches, was thrust at Goethe. He helped himself. The dish was withdrawn and he could listen again.

'Things have changed since my grandfather was alive,' continued the King of Württemberg, a little thickly. 'Etiquette meant something in those days. Even in my father's court there were two chamberlains

who were occupied with nothing else; good work I assure you, good solid work.'

'We are growing slovenly,' put in the King of Bavaria. 'The oddest things happen. Only the other day I had to prevent the wife of a Papal Count taking precedence over the wife of a Baron of the Empire.'

A short silence followed, broken suddenly by the clear, metallic voice of the Emperor.

'When I was serving as a lieutenant in the second regiment of artillery,' he said, 'I read books on heraldry. Reading was my only occupation. I read everything in the Public Library at Valence, and most of it twice.'

The silence deepened. Kings and princes looked at their plates. Napoleon turned to Alexander and pledged him across the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, who sat between as their host.

Goethe ceased to listen to his table companions. He resented the presence of other men. He should have met Napoleon alone. Then, perhaps, he might have solved the riddle. Even at that meeting four days ago there had been only a divided intercourse. Augereau had come and gone and, from the breakfast table, orders had sped forth at intervals. Yet perhaps it was better so. For Napoleon was genius in action. Each movement of his restless spirit was energy released. For him there was nothing unfulfilled, no overplus of vision. Everything he did, even though it had a double face, expressed the man. That heraldic intervention, for example, what did it signify? Real simplicity? Or a deliberate intrusion for effect? Did it matter which? It declared his achievement and destroyed the pretensions of lesser men.

§ 13

Two hours later he stood at the side of the ballroom, watching the couples dancing by the light of torches stuck in medieval brackets of iron bolted to the stone walls. The Czar was moving dexterously through the figures of a contredanse with his partner, the Queen of Westphalia.

Suddenly, close at hand, came the metallic voice for which he waited.

‘That is so, Herr Wieland. But like Voltaire, you corrupt history with romance.’

Goethe turned sharply. Napoleon, some paces away from him, was sitting in an alcove, partly obscured by a velvet curtain. Wieland, for all his weight of years, was standing.

‘You should keep them apart, Herr Wieland. Running them together breeds confusion.’

‘Your Majesty must permit me to differ,’ returned the old poet bravely. ‘If an artist uses history, he may twist it to serve his purpose. Even truth must yield to his necessities.’

‘Take care, Herr Wieland. Those who twist truth for the sake of a fable will in the end believe that truth is itself a fable.’

Goethe waited for the Emperor to continue, but the music made it impossible to hear what followed next. Napoleon, when again he became audible, was speaking peremptorily and with decision.

‘Be warned by Tacitus. He defaced history with prejudice. He did not take men and nations as he found them. I have heard him praised because he deliberately set out to make his tyrants dread the people. But tyrants are sometimes necessary, and sedition, prompted by calumny, may be very bad for the people.’

Wieland, clearing his throat, entered upon a long defence of the Roman historian. Napoleon's brow was smooth. A light smile played round his lips. He seemed to be taking the lecture in good part.

'You speak with conviction, Herr Wieland, but I do not approve of Tacitus.'

Napoleon's smile was almost waggish.

'Herr Wieland, you are a sceptic, are you not? Your whole life proves it. So do your works. Here we can meet on common ground.'

He bent forward like a conspirator.

'For me,' he said, 'it is an open question whether Christ ever lived.'

The old poet straightened himself and held more firmly to the back of the gilt chair against which he was leaning for support, but his reply was clear and steady.

'There are, I believe, sir, people who doubt whether Christ ever lived. For me that would be just as foolish as to doubt that Julius Caesar lived or that you, sir, are alive today.'

There was a moment's silence. Goethe smiled. Old Wieland was really rather fine. The Emperor rose and with a smile laid his hand on the poet's shoulder.

'I respect your conviction, but I do not share it,' he said. 'Nevertheless the value of Christianity as a buttress of the State is incalculable.'

Napoleon turned away abruptly and, as he did so, caught sight of Goethe. His eyes lit and he moved a step forward. Goethe found his hand seized and shaken warmly.

'I have read Werther from end to end seven times,' said the Emperor. 'It is magnificent. Your genius has never displayed itself to better advantage. But the

end, you know, is all wrong. I do not like it. If there must be a catastrophe, let the tragedy be undivided. In your play the love of Werther was not the only passion that ruined him. There was his ambition. Was that not also responsible?'

Goethe drew back. The abrupt attack disconcerted him.

'An artist, sir, may be excused an artifice which few readers will detect.'

'You have confused the issue. The result is contrary to nature. I regret that you should follow Shakespeare. He is a bad example. Only the classics are worthy of imitation. Classical tragedy is the school of kings and peoples. It is an education in virtue. It should therefore rise above human frailty. We see the great characters of Corneille as veritable heroes. We surprise them in their supreme moments, when they are stripped of the encumbrances with which the historian obscures their significance. You should see great men as statues in which the weaknesses and tremors of the flesh are no longer perceptible.'

'Your Majesty would see them face to face with destiny?'

Napoleon shook his head decisively.

'I do not like pieces in which destiny plays a part. They belong to a primitive epoch. What do the poets mean by destiny? Destiny, today, is only another name for politics.'

He paused and added suddenly.

'Does the visit of the Emperor of Russia to Weimar please you, Herr Goethe?'

Goethe bowed stiffly. He, too, was a politician.

'I hope these days will prove of advantage to our small country,' he said.

'Your people are happy?'

Goethe felt the flattery. Napoleon spoke to him as to the head of a sovereign State.

'We have no reason, sir, to fear a revolution. Our people will, I hope, remember that Your Majesty after Jena was generous to my master.'

Napoleon frowned slightly.

'The Duke was in fault, but he was fortunate in his Minister and even more fortunate in his wife. The Duchess is a brave and noble woman. I spared your master for her sake.'

Goethe bowed, his face expressionless.

'Herr Goethe, you are a statesman as well as a poet. The combination is rare. You should turn your attention to history. You might begin by writing your impressions of this conference.'

'I am scarcely near enough to these events. I am but the Minister of a small State which accepts them.'

'Then you should write of them as a poet.'

'For that I am perhaps too near. I should find it difficult to see Your Majesty or the Czar yonder,' he flashed a look at Alexander dancing past the alcove, 'as statues.'

Napoleon laughed.

'Why not rewrite the death of Caesar? Deal with it on a higher plane.'

The Emperor made an eager, nervous gesture with his right hand.

'Such a tragedy might well be the greatest work of your life. I can see so well how it should be done. Your aim would be to show how much happiness Caesar would have conferred on mankind had he been given time to carry out his far-reaching plans. Come to Paris, Herr Goethe. Let me insist. Write your tragedy there. From Paris you will get a wider view of the world. There you will find material in abundance.'

The Emperor spoke impulsively with an eager, almost boyish air of having suddenly come upon a bright idea. Was that the secret of his power? He had these bright ideas and they were at once converted into bright realities. The imagination of the poet was for a moment stirred. This might be flattery, but there was vision in it.

'I thank His Majesty most deeply for his proposal,' he said with a bow. 'I should deem myself only too happy were it possible for me to accept it.'

The Emperor looked for a moment baffled.

'But of course,' he said, 'you have your official duties. I hope they will not keep you from coming again to the theatre while I am at Erfurt. You should see yet more of our French acting. The audience, too, is remarkable. You know the Prince Primate? But of course you do. Well, you may see him every night there in his box fast asleep with his head on the shoulder of the King of Württemberg.'

He looked away for a moment.

'There goes Alexander,' he said, as the Czar passed the alcove a second time. 'You should dedicate something to him in commemoration of Erfurt.'

Goethe shook his head.

'I have never ventured upon a political dedication, sir. I have therefore never had occasion to repent it.'

Napoleon smiled again.

'You shall hear from me again, Herr Goethe, before I leave Erfurt,' he said, and turned back to his suite.

Goethe resumed his old position. The conversation had unsettled him. He stood at the edge of the wide hall, watching the pacing couples. They were moving now round the ballroom two by two to the time of a Polish march, but very shortly the orchestra broke

into a waltz tune from Vienna. The rainbow figures ceased their pacing and began to move with the speed of shining tops. A young French officer in scarlet trousers with blue stripes, his jacket heavily ornamented with gold, swung past. On his arm was a girl with dark curls and a flushed face. Her eyes were closed and upon her mouth was a smile of ecstasy.

Goethe looked after them for a moment, but he was in the epic mood, obsessed by the short figure in the blue and white uniform with the luminous grey eyes. He had met at last a man who gave a fuller significance to his own life. He, too, had used all that had come his way to affirm and enrich his own significance. Napoleon had flattered him, had set out to secure his allegiance. The purpose was plain, but the flattery had worked all the same. For was it not the greatest of tributes from such a man that he should think it worth his while to flatter? And had it not been implicit between them from the first that they stood apart from other men in a community of understanding?

This link between them went beyond the ideas which they so evidently held in common: hatred of disorder, distrust of the crowd, contempt of doctrine, disregard of the common virtues whereby men were levelled and disciplined, the passion to excel. These were all motives of sympathy, but they did not go to the root of their common feeling. This Napoleon was the man he might have imagined as a projection of himself in action, the ultimate beauty of a personality expressing itself freely and without misgiving, unfettered by prejudice or respect of other men, rising above tradition and expressing himself continually in the event. This present scene expressed in every detail the will of the man who had revived in his person the exploits of Caesar and of Charlemagne. All those

bright uniforms were worn because of him. From the kings, with their carefully graded retinues, to the flunkies in their Weimar liveries, all were there because of him, along with the tall Emperor from the wastes of Russia who had come posting across Europe at his call.

Here is a man ! It was the epitaph he would have chosen, and Napoleon had addressed it to him. It was one he could return in fellowship. *Das war ein Kerl.* Napoleon, supremely himself, would expend the full sum of his energy. He would burn himself out and, destroying himself, be remembered for ever as a portent.

§ 14

Lackeys were passing through a doorway which led to a room off the hall. They carried gilded trays bearing tall glasses filled with champagne. Philip de Ségur moved into the room, his eye catching at once at the further end, under the windows, the long white-covered buffet which supported strange meats: a boar's head with an apple in its mouth, flanked by two enormous salmon prinked with parsley and other herbs, castellated cakes in white and pink sugar, pheasants in all their feathers, a portrait of the two Emperors in pastry and crystallised fruits.

He pushed his way slowly through the groups of dancers. Half way down the wall was an ante-room. There was no door, but the entrance was masked by a heavy curtain and a large screen.

He was about to pass it when a familiar voice came to his ear.

'Recall what I wrote to you from Paris. An army of fifty thousand men, Russians and French, with perhaps a sprinkling of Austrians, penetrating by way

of Constantinople into Asia, would not reach the Euphrates before England would feel the threat and give us peace.'

De Ségur stopped dead. He should, as he knew, withdraw, but no, he must stay and listen.

'I am ready in Dalmatia. Your Majesty is ready on the Danube. In a month our armies could be on the Bosphorus.'

'The prospects are inviting.'

'These are not prospects, Majesty, but certainties. The English, threatened in the Indies and the Levant, must inevitably come to terms.'

De Ségur looked round the edge of the curtain. Napoleon was standing in the middle of the room, his hands twisted in the small of his back, his head thrust forward.

The Czar was seated on a sofa near the fireplace. He had the sullen look of a man who was determined not to be moved.

'England,' he said 'will never make peace until Austria has accepted the present situation in Spain.'

'That,' said Napoleon quickly, 'is a complication. It must be removed. Austria must recognise my brother Joseph. That is the first step. You must use your influence with Vienna.'

There was a short silence, broken at last by Alexander.

'I am sorry, Your Majesty,' he said formally, 'but I cannot consent to bring any pressure to bear on the Emperor Francis.'

'Then our alliance stands for nothing. It is a gesture without meaning.'

Napoleon spoke harshly now, with exasperation. Alexander sat motionless. Napoleon walked towards him and flung out his right hand.

'How can peace be secured unless we discourage

England and the Spanish rebels?'

'I cannot believe'—the Czar spoke as one reciting a lesson—'that peace with England can be secured by intimidation.'

'Intimidation!' Napoleon picked up the word as he turned sharply on his heel and strode away down the room. His sallow face was flushed and de Ségur saw his eyes change suddenly. He turned back upon Alexander with the jerky abruptness of a marionette unskilfully twitched.

'Intimidation,' he repeated. 'Call it what you please. But it is necessary that you should use your influence with the Emperor Francis. My own wishes are known in Vienna. It is for Your Majesty to be equally plain.'

'I regret, Majesty, but that is impossible.'

Napoleon was a man transformed. His eyes blazed. His small body appeared to dilate.

'Impossible,' he echoed. 'What folly is this? Cannot we take even one step together? Is all our conference to end in nothing? I desire that you write immediately to Vienna.'

'Impossible,' the Czar repeated firmly.

Napoleon stepped forward, snatched his three-cornered hat from the table beside him and, flinging it to the floor, stamped upon it violently.

Alexander rose slowly to his feet. He stood looking at Napoleon and there was a smile on his lips.

'Your Majesty is violent,' he said, 'but I am obstinate. Anger wins nothing from me. Let us discuss this matter. Let us reason together. Otherwise I had better withdraw.'

For a moment the two Emperors faced one another. Then de Ségur to his amazement saw a smile on the face of Napoleon. No trace of passion remained.

‘By all means, Your Majesty,’ he said, ‘let us reason together.’

Alexander went and picked up the damaged hat. Napoleon accepted it.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘let us sit by the fire. There is wine here if Your Majesty is thirsty.’

De Ségur turned and walked softly away.

§ 15

Felix tripped over the fringed rug lying at the foot of the painted door. He stumbled awkwardly into the room. It was nearly midnight. He was barely in time and, to crown all, he was clumsy. He recovered himself quickly, the blood hot in his cheeks, and saw the Princess standing by the fire in her long robe of swansdown.

‘You are late, Felix,’ she said, ‘and you enter like a regiment advancing to rape a city.’

He stood awkwardly some three yards away from her, seeking for something to say. But he could only stammer.

‘Madam, I can find no words. I received your message but an hour ago. I have come in haste. I cannot express . . . I cannot express——’

The Princess held out her hands. The swansdown robe parted at the throat.

‘Tell me this way,’ she said softly.

She stepped towards him and her cool arms slipped about his neck.

Then in an instant her face changed. Sudden fear, instantly controlled, swept her features like wind on the surface of water.

Someone was knocking on the door.

The hand of the Princess caught his own, firmly yet gently.

'Keep still,' she whispered.

Felix, his heart beating to a different rhythm, crouched as quickly as a cat behind the head of the bed.

She called softly in German.

'What is it?'

Her voice was level. There was even a drowsy note in it.

The knocking was repeated.

'Come in,' said the Princess.

She was sitting now on the edge of the bed, and had moved the candles, so that the head of it, behind which he crouched, was in shadow. A maid stood in the doorway and Felix heard a murmured phrase in German.

'I will come,' said the Princess. 'Order tea to be served.'

The door had hardly closed when she turned to Felix.

'It is Monsieur de Talleyrand,' she said. 'He has arrived unexpectedly and the Czar is with him. I did not think they would visit me tonight. Wait here for me, Felix.'

Mirror in hand, she arranged her hair. Then she crossed the room, her slippered feet making no sound on the carpet. The door was pushed open.

'Majesty!' her voice was calm and cool. 'How wrong of me not to expect you. You, too, Monsieur de Talleyrand. Come nearer to the fire.'

The voices died away.

Felix rose from his hiding place. The door of the bedroom was not quite closed.

'I had to see you, Talleyrand. I need your advice.'

Felix paused in the act of closing the door. What advice did the Czar require from Talleyrand? Felix, on an impulse, bent to listen.

‘Napoleon pressed me hard this evening. He was very frank with me, very frank indeed.’

‘Did he speak to Your Majesty of his marriage?’

‘So far I have kept him at bay. But I am leaving the day after tomorrow and I must take a decision.’

‘Your Majesty has, I believe, two sisters?’

‘Anne is too young. It would be Kate. But the match would commit me too far. It would mean reversing the policy on which we have agreed.’

‘The suggestion, Your Majesty, can be entertained without being, so to speak, embraced. There is no reason why you should not allow my master to imagine that you are considering the matter.’

‘Of course, if I need go no further than that——’

‘You can hardly be expected to go further at this moment. There is still an Empress at the Tuileries.’

There came a rattle of tea-cups in which the Czar’s reply was lost to Felix.

‘Thank you, Princess. This is more than we deserve. But we Russians can drink tea, you know, at any hour of the day or night.’

There was a further exchange of courtesies, which Felix was unable to catch. Then he heard again the voice of Alexander.

‘Roumanzoff and Champagne sign the treaty tomorrow,’ he said.

The Czar laughed. He seemed now to be in high good humour.

‘Your Majesty is satisfied?’

‘I have every reason to be.’

‘Your Majesty, I am glad to say, has been very firm,’ answered Talleyrand. ‘Napoleon sent for me today and told me of his last conversation with you on the subject. He did not conceal his disappointment.’

‘Indeed!’

‘I will give you his words as exactly as I can remember them. “I can do nothing with the Czar,” he said. “He is short-sighted and he is stubborn. I made no progress at all.” I ventured to point out that Your Majesty was very much under his influence, and that, if you hesitated to commit yourself on paper, that was owing, perhaps, to your Majesty’s generous disposition, which caused you to dislike being tied by the written word.’

Once more there was silence. Then the Czar began abruptly again. His tone had changed. It was uneasy, regretful, almost ashamed.

‘He is a great man, Talleyrand. Every time I talk with him I feel it more. I realise, of course, that in the present state of affairs caution is necessary. I must not commit myself. You have saved me from that. But is it necessary for me in the circumstances to go further? You suggested yesterday that I should write personally to the Emperor Francis, assuring him in any event of my neutrality. It seems to me that by doing so I should be encouraging him to attack your master at the first favourable opportunity.’

‘The Emperor Francis needs to be put at ease. This conference at Erfurt, from which Austria has been excluded, is causing great anxiety in Vienna. Your Majesty’s intentions are distrusted. I feel that some form of reassurance is necessary, and undoubtedly the best way of putting things right in that quarter would be for you to communicate personally with the Austrian Emperor.’

The Czar sighed heavily.

‘I do not like it, Talleyrand. But I will do as you suggest. I will write to my brother Francis before the end of the week.’

‘That is a wise decision, Majesty.’

Once again silence fell. What treachery was this? Felix was burning with indignation—not least against the Princess who was privy to this infamy. He looked towards the window. He only wanted now to get away. But the voices held him against his will. They had fallen to a lower note, and it shortly appeared that Talleyrand was seeking his reward.

‘Not for myself, Your Majesty, I assure you, but I have a nephew.’

‘A nephew? You speak, my dear Talleyrand, like a Prince of the Church?’

‘Old habits die hard, and there are men who still like to remind me that I was once a bishop.’

The Czar laughed lightly. The Princess was laughing too.

‘You accept the implication, Prince,’ she said.

‘No, Princess, I am indeed the uncle of my nephew, but I am nevertheless most anxious to marry him to advantage. In France that is impossible. The Emperor reserves all our heiresses for his soldiers. None but the brave deserve the rich. There is, however, a family in Russia whose alliance I am trying to secure. The hand of the Princess Dorothea of Courland would overwhelm my nephew Edmond with happiness, and I need hardly assure Your Majesty that such an arrangement would greatly increase the confidence between us.’

‘It shall have my personal attention,’ said the Czar after a pause. ‘Meanwhile I shall send de Nesselrode to Paris as Councillor of Embassy. He will understand that he is, in effect, accredited to yourself.’

‘If I may say so, that is a most admirable suggestion, Your Majesty.’

Felix walked across the bedroom and lifted aside

the curtain covering the window, which he pushed cautiously open. It gave, as he knew, on to a little garden behind the house. There was a drop of not more than eight feet to the ground.

For a moment he hesitated. If the Princess found him gone she would suspect that he had overheard their conference. She would warn Talleyrand. Talleyrand would be put upon his guard. Felix considered the matter. Would it not be wiser to remain? At daybreak he would return to his quarters and convey what he had heard to Duroc.

He dropped the curtain into place. All was silent now in the adjacent room. He walked softly to the door and closed it. Then he flung himself into a low chair and waited.

The Princess was not long in coming. She found him changed to her liking. He was summary, silent, brutal, treating her without endearment or respect.

Three hours later he climbed the stairs to his room in the Palace. He shook de Najac in his bed.

‘Where is Duroc?’ he demanded harshly.

De Najac yawned resentfully.

‘Duroc left for Paris an hour ago,’ he said.

‘And the Emperor?’

‘He leaves tomorrow.’

Felix shaved and dressed again with care. He was to go that morning to Walewska. Should he tell her of the treachery of Talleyrand? Should he perhaps seek an audience of the Emperor himself?

First thoughts were best. Duroc was clearly his surest method of approach. Besides he would have to reveal how he had acquired his information and to Duroc confession would come more easily than to anyone else he knew.

He finished dressing and made his way downstairs.

Outside the Emperor's room Roustan was on guard. Felix approached. The Mameluke handed him a sealed paper.

'For the Countess Walewska,' he said. 'I shall be this night at the garden gate. The Emperor will expect madam between eleven and twelve.'

§ 16

'If madam will step this way. The Emperor awaits madam.'

It was the voice of Roustan, smooth and lisping. Walewska stood trembling a little, but not with cold, at the garden gate, hidden by the trees which screened the back of the Palace of the Prince Primate. The night was moonless. Twenty yards behind her Felix Marbot waited in the alley.

She had stayed for three days at Ottstedt, not daring to venture beyond the inn garden. Most of the time she had spent at the open window of her room, watching the traffic pass on the road: Russian uniforms, surmounted by high red faces and brushed moustaches, foolish, vacant, soldier faces; Saxe-Weimar huntsmen in green; French hussars in green and gold and French lancers in gold and crimson. She had waited three days for a message which seemed ever longer in coming, and all that time, as she had sat in the mild October sunshine or over the sweet-smelling fire of vine roots and beech logs which they lit for her every evening when the sun fell, her will had hardened till she knew exactly what she must say to the Emperor and how to say it.

Yet now, when the moment had come, she stumbled as she set foot on the path. A smooth hand, which she could not see in the darkness, placed itself obsequiously

beneath her elbow. She moved aside impatiently.

‘Go forward,’ she said. ‘I will follow.’

The path twisted aimlessly, but finally broadened to a small terrace. She saw, on her right hand, the stone wall of a high building. She climbed some stone steps, her hand grasping a thin balustrade of beaten iron, wet and cold to the touch.

‘One moment, madam.’

She halted on the top step but one; the faint creaking of a door, opening with difficulty, came to her ears, and a light shone out. Roustan, a dark shadow, stood aside with a mechanical bow. She walked upon rush matting that carpeted a winding stair, lit by a single fat candle in an old-fashioned horn lantern of brass which swung a little in the draught above her head. Roustan had shut the door and she signed to him to precede her up the stairs. With another bow he led the way till they stood before a curtain. Roustan pulled it aside and beckoned her forward. She stepped on to a landing whence the main staircase swept down to her right. Roustan moved forward softly and pushed open a door slightly ajar, standing aside to let her pass. The door closed softly behind her.

The room was panelled half-way up the walls in white, picked out with gold. Above the panelling hung tapestries of faded blue and green. To her left, a few paces away, stood a tall lacquered screen, with a pattern upon it of Chinese pagodas and mandarins in dull gold on a black ground. She stood still a moment, hesitating, when round the screen came the Emperor. He was wearing a dressing-gown trimmed with fur and a frilled nightshirt showed at his throat. He advanced towards her and drew her to him without a word.

‘I should have you court-martialled for this,’ he said. ‘But thank God you have come.’

His lips were moving on her cheek and his words were muffled. Tears were pricking behind her lids. She drew her head back a moment and looked at him. But his head sank and his face was buried against her throat.

‘Napoleon! I must speak to you.’

‘Presently,’ he pleaded, ‘presently.’

He drew her behind the screen and she saw, over his shoulder, a wide carved bed. His hands fumbled awkwardly with her dress. He would never listen to her thus. But her heart quickened at his eagerness.

‘You’ll tear it,’ she said and, with fingers that also fumbled a little, helped him to untie the sash at her waist.

An hour later she lay beside him in the candle-light wondering how she should break to him the object of her visit. His face lay quiet upon the fringed pillow and he looked at her from beneath half-shut lids. He was at peace. She was reluctant to break in upon that rare tranquillity. Yet she must speak while there was time. For she knew that, as so often before, his restless mind, in abeyance for this brief moment, would suddenly break from its repose and her opportunity would pass.

‘Napoleon,’ she said softly.

He did not stir, but she felt that he was listening.

‘Now I must talk to you,’ she continued.

‘Talk, if you must.’

His voice was drowsy. She leaned over him and kept her eyes fixed on his face.

‘Do you remember what you said to me in Paris?’

His hand pressed her shoulder.

‘I made you a proposal of marriage. You were to think it over.’

‘I have come to give you the answer. It is quite impossible. I can never be your Empress.’

He did not move or seem in any way startled.

‘What must I do, Marie?’ he asked in mock humility.

‘You must marry the Czar’s sister for the sake of Europe, but, most of all, for your own sake. That is what I came to tell you. I thought you might consider yourself bound by what you said to me at our last meeting.’

Napoleon raised himself on one elbow and put his other arm about her.

‘So that is why you came, to get me safely married? I was hoping you had come to prevent it.’

He drew back and looked at her resentfully.

‘I want you to be jealous, like any ordinary woman of her lover.’

He paused again and broke out violently.

‘Must you think always of the Emperor? I will tell you something, Marie. I would rather tonight you had been angry and made a scene. When I heard you were in Erfurt, my first thought was that you had come to stop this Russian match and to reproach me for having deserted you.’

‘How could you think that of me?’

‘What else in reason could I think? You have only to be seen here in the streets and Alexander would be furious.’

‘For that reason I have remained hidden night and day.’

‘My second thought, when I saw how carefully you concealed your presence, even though I kept you waiting, was that you had taken this fearful risk simply to meet as we are meeting now. But no, Marie. These are the motives that move men and women who can live and love as they please. You came, it seems, to remind me that I am the Emperor.’

He looked at her a moment and added bitterly:

'The journey was not only dangerous. It was unnecessary. There was no need to remind me that policy comes first, and I have actually discussed this Russian marriage with Alexander. I am not committed. It may come to nothing. But for the moment it is essential that I should seem to consider it seriously. I cannot otherwise be sure of him.'

Marie drew back to the edge of the bed. This was what she had wished, but the humiliation was bitter. She had come proudly to release him from his word. But he had taken his way alone. She had come on a fool's errand.

He noted her recoil.

'You must forgive me, Marie. I had not forgotten what I said to you in Paris. But I counted on your love. I knew that you would understand. There was no need for you to come so far to tell me what I must do.'

She pressed towards him and his right arm caught and held her.

'I am tired, Marie,' he said. 'These are not the days of Tilsit. Am I beginning to lose courage?'

She drew his head down, and folded him close.

'You will never lose your courage.'

He looked up at her and smiled.

'Let me sleep,' he said. 'No, do not move. Stay as we are.'

Almost before she had settled herself beside him he was sleeping fast. She had often marvelled at his ability to fall asleep at once, without effort or transition.

After a time, she began to study his face. In sleep it was almost lifeless, as though a hand had smoothed out its significance. The high nose seemed carved in alabaster.

But what was this? The mask was breaking. The regular breathing of the sleeper quickened. The face darkened. The cheeks and forehead were reddened and suffused. Suddenly a groan broke from the parted lips. The whole body contracted in a strong spasm and straightened itself so violently that the bed-coverings slipped and fell half-way to the floor. His left hand, which had lain softly upon her upper arm, clutched it so fiercely that the nails bit into her flesh and from his mouth escaped a harsh, inarticulate sound. His breath came ever more shortly and his right hand was thrust into the pit of his stomach.

Marie, with her free hand, shook him by the shoulder. Again came that hoarse cry, like an animal in pain.

‘Napoleon!’

Again she shook him. His eyes opened with a start and he sat up so abruptly that she was thrown sideways away from him, almost to the floor. She turned and looked at him. He was seated on the edge of the bed. His hands were laid upon his breast and he looked fearfully about him.

‘It was a dream,’ he muttered.

He turned and saw her half kneeling beside him.

‘Still there, Marie. You have seen nothing, heard nothing?’

‘Nothing. You are in your own room. I have been here watching you asleep.’

The sweat was streaming down his face. His body was cold. She stroked his shoulder, speaking to him as to a frightened child.

‘So that was a dream,’ he said. ‘I do not often dream. It was terrible. I dreamed that a bear was tearing open my breast and eating my heart.’

He slipped from the bed and flung his robe

awkwardly about his shoulders. He began to walk up and down the room. Suddenly he stood still, shuddering violently.

‘Are you all right? Shall I call someone?’

He shook his head.

‘Marie, what does it mean?’

‘You are tired and overwrought.’

He continued to walk about the room, not the collected pacing she knew so well, but like a man driven up and down.

‘It is a warning. Russia will destroy me. I must obey this premonition. I must meet this danger now, while I can face it. Tell me, Marie. That is the meaning of the dream? Tell me. Tell me.’

He looked to her for an answer.

‘I do not read it so,’ she said, ‘but every dream has a double face. To me it seems that this one gives form to your own conviction. You know that Russia is dangerous. Therefore you must make your peace with her. You must make a friend, not an enemy, of Alexander.’

He stood looking down at her in perplexity.

‘Marie,’ he said. ‘We will take no decision yet, no decision as between you and me. Time will show us where the danger lies and how to meet it.’

He walked to the window and drew aside the curtain. A pale light, but strong against the weak flame of the candle, slipped through the folds of the heavy silk.

‘I will call Roustan,’ he said.

§ 17

The windows of the ambassador’s private room in the Austrian Embassy in Paris stood open. The

afternoon was mild, quite remarkably mild for the time of year. Metternich sat at his desk, finishing a despatch. He paused a moment, soothing his high forehead with the end of the quill. His full under lip was thrust out and he was smiling. He bent over the sheet of paper beneath his right hand:

This journey to Erfurt, undertaken with the explicit object of inducing the Emperor of Russia to take active measures against us, was regarded by Monsieur de Talleyrand from a very different point of view. As soon as he arrived, he got into touch with Alexander and saw him frequently while the Conference was in progress.

Metternich paused again and looked out of the window at the tops of certain plane trees whose broad leaves were falling slowly. He resumed his writing:

The results of these interviews, as conveyed to me by Monsieur de Talleyrand himself only yesterday, are best summarised in his conviction that, since the Battle of Austerlitz, the sentiments of Alexander towards the Empire of Austria have never been more favourable. The future will in fact depend henceforth on Your Majesty alone, and Monsieur de Talleyrand strongly advises you to renew with Russia relations as intimate as those which formerly united you. He regards such a renewal as necessary to the salvation of all that remains of European liberty.

Metternich finished writing. To wait, to watch, to be patient, till patience was hardly to be borne—that had been his lot for four years. It seemed likely to be his lot for many years to come, but patience lit with hope was easy to bear. He continued:

Your Majesty may safely infer from this communication that we shall henceforth have friends to do us service even in the heart of the French Empire.

He scrawled his name at the foot of the despatch and, scattering sand upon it, began to read it through.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. He was tired and the bold script wavered in the fading light. He rose from his desk and moved towards the open window. The sound of hooves attracted his attention and he looked up over the edge of the despatch.

Round the corner of the street came a rider. He was in plain clothes, dusty and stained. Horse and man seemed equally worn. They passed at a lurching canter under the window.

Metternich looked down and immediately recognised the rider.

'Savary,' he murmured, 'back from Spain and on his way to the Tuileries.'

He finished reading the despatch. Then he walked to his desk and struck a bell. A footman entered and Metternich ordered the candle to be lit for sealing. He sealed the despatch and handed it to his secretary who had appeared silently at his elbow.

'Is the Emperor still in Paris?' he asked.

'Yes, sir. They say he is expecting news from Spain and that he will set out immediately on receipt of it.'

Metternich turned his head away so that his secretary should not see the light in his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

§ I

‘THAT, in brief, is the situation, and I do not think we have any reason to be dissatisfied.’

‘I think you have done very well indeed.’

Fouché smiled a tribute, but was careful not to take his eyes from the face of Talleyrand.

‘We may take it, then, that the Russian treaty of alliance is no more than a pious text?’ Fouché continued.

Talleyrand nodded.

‘And therefore subject to many interpretations.’

Fouché noted with irritation that Talleyrand was allowing his attention to wander. There came a muffled click and then, across the silence which slowly deepened between them after Talleyrand’s last words, a murmur of voices, audible from the next room: ‘Doubles,’ and then an oath: ‘My God, impossible.’

The gaming-rooms of the Green Cockatoo were not as quiet a rendezvous as could be wished. But they were secret. Fouché wished the walls of the slightly faded room in which they were sitting had been sound-proof. He knew what the click of dice meant to Talleyrand and it was essential to hold his attention. Was this the clue, perhaps, to his disposition?

A gamester, not only on the green cloth, but on the table of Europe?

Fouché stretched out a hand and filled the glasses before them.

‘All this,’ he said, ‘is better than I dared to hope. But how are you going to keep in touch with Alexander?’

‘That, too, is arranged,’ answered Talleyrand smoothly. ‘He is sending de Nesselrode to Paris as First Secretary. De Nesselrode is officially accredited to the Tuileries, but unofficially to me.’

‘You are happy about Austria?’

‘Francis will interpret Alexander’s letter as an invitation to move as soon as he is ready. Austria is arming quietly. Have you the figures?’

Fouché shook his head.

‘I cannot give you the figures, but she is losing no time.’

‘She will go the quicker for this business,’ said Talleyrand.

He sipped his wine for a moment.

‘There is one thing I forgot to mention. There will never, I think, be any question of a Russian marriage. It will be kept in view as a possibility. But Napoleon must ride to Petersburg for his bride if he wishes to bring her home.’

Talleyrand smiled slowly.

‘I worked hard at Erfurt,’ he said. ‘Our master can be very charming. We who live close to him tend to forget it. Alexander was under the spell and it is a great relief to think that now there are more than a thousand miles between them.’

Talleyrand sat back, his glass in his hand.

‘It is your turn, Fouché. What has been happening in Paris?’

‘ There is, of course, a good deal of uneasiness about this Spanish business. The funds have been falling steadily. They strengthened for a moment upon news of the Russian alliance, but started to fall again when it became generally known that the Emperor was going to Spain.’

Talleyrand adjusted the lace at his wrists.

‘ This, then, is the time to buy? ’

Fouché sat back in astonishment.

‘ You anticipate a victory? ’

‘ It is usual when the Emperor goes to war.’

Talleyrand smiled.

‘ But let us not buy together,’ he continued. ‘ And I beg you to go quietly for a time, or we shall spoil the market.’

‘ I will tell my man to keep in touch with yours, with all three of them in fact.’

The eyebrows of his companion rose in astonishment.

‘ You are well informed,’ he murmured.

Fouché poured himself out another glass of wine.

‘ There is another matter. You know, of course, that the Walewska was in Erfurt? ’

Talleyrand, whose wine glass was half-way to his lips, set it down untasted and looked in astonishment at Fouché.

‘ I did not see her there.’

‘ I am further informed that she saw the Empress just before leaving Paris. She went in great haste and secrecy.’

‘ Josephine and Walewska. What can it mean? ’

‘ I was hoping you would be able to tell me that,’ said Fouché.

Talleyrand shook his head.

‘ We should, perhaps, look into the matter. I will

‘speak to the Walewska. You, perhaps, might have a word with Josephine.’

‘There may be nothing in it. But it is well to be sure.’

Fouché paused and added:

‘Now as to the future. The Emperor leaves tomorrow. Has Murat been warned?’

Instinctively he looked over his shoulder, though there was no danger, for the Green Cockatoo was held by one of his best men.

‘Has Murat been warned?’ he repeated on a lower note.

‘Not directly. You know Murat. It would be most unwise to speak to him at all plainly at this stage.’

Talleyrand placed the tips of his fingers together and leaned back. The gesture of a priest, thought Fouché.

‘We must work upon Murat through Caroline,’ Talleyrand continued smoothly.

‘You will write to her?’

‘I suggest a joint letter. It will, of course, be only a preliminary message. She must be warned to prepare her husband.’

Fouché set down his wineglass, lest Talleyrand should see the slight trembling of his right hand.

‘I am, of course, quite ready to join with you in writing to the Queen of Naples,’ he said. ‘But do you suggest that Murat should be kept in ignorance?’

‘I do not know what Caroline may have said to him. But I have no doubt that, when the time comes, she will know what to do.’

‘How far have you gone with the Queen of Naples?’

‘I have spoken to her only once, and that was before I had had the satisfaction of being able to open my mind

to you. She is merely expectant. She knows nothing definite as yet.'

'Would not a joint letter perhaps at this stage alarm her? I should have thought that a personal communication from yourself . . .'

Fouché broke off under the mocking gaze of Talleyrand.

'On the contrary,' said Talleyrand, 'I should imagine that the Queen would be most happy to know that she has won to her interests so valuable an ally as the Minister Fouché.'

Fouché sat very still in his chair. Things were going to be put on paper. That, perhaps, was dangerous. There was in fact no 'perhaps' about it. It *was* dangerous. He cast about in his mind for some way to avoid it.

'Perhaps,' he ventured, 'a letter is not necessary.'

'Are you proposing to send a confidential messenger to Naples? That would mean trusting a third party. No, Fouché. Of course it must be a letter and I shall leave you to despatch it in the safest possible manner.'

'How will you draft this communication?' demanded Fouché.

Talleyrand pursed his lips.

'The Queen of Naples is intelligent. She will read between the lines. I shall begin by reminding her, I think, of our former interview. I shall allude in particular to the great honour she has paid me in giving me her confidence.'

'Excellent. That compromises Caroline if it should fall into the wrong hands and she will, therefore, take good care that it does not.'

'I shall then allude to the anxiety felt by many of us here in Paris at the thought of the Emperor once more risking his life in a distant corner of Europe.'

I shall intimate that some of us are wondering whether his luck will hold and speculating as to what may happen if things should go wrong in Spain . . .’

Talleyrand paused and made to pour out more wine.

‘If things should go wrong in Spain,’ echoed Fouché.

Talleyrand, arrested by the echo, set down the decanter.

‘Fouché,’ he said with quiet decision, ‘if anything should happen to our master in Spain, it will be an act of God.’

‘Of course.’

‘An act of God,’ repeated Talleyrand. ‘There must be no ambiguity. This letter which we are about to write is based on the sole supposition that the Emperor may meet with an accident. A stray ball, or even a defeat, may rob France not only of his presence, but of his life. Such an event would, I repeat, be an act of God, and I for one do not regard myself as God’s Minister.’

Talleyrand spoke with great gravity. Fouché had his answer ready.

‘You have been very frank,’ he said slowly. ‘Let me be equally so. I have no intention of assisting Providence. It has been my business to keep the Emperor safe. The time is coming, perhaps, when that will be no longer possible. But so long as the Emperor is safe, I am the Emperor’s man.’

Fouché looked at Talleyrand full in the face as he spoke. Talleyrand nodded and a light smile played about his lips.

‘I quite understand,’ he said dryly. ‘All that we do now is merely by way of insurance.’

‘Expressed with your usual felicity, Talleyrand.’

Fouché again filled the empty glasses between them.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘the letter.’

Talleyrand smiled.

‘We will write it at once,’ he said.

Talleyrand rose to his feet, walked across the room and returned from a small desk bearing paper, a quill pen and a small stone jar of ink. He looked at the pen ruefully as he sat to the table.

‘A sad necessity,’ he murmured. ‘I hate writing letters, my dear Fouché, almost as much as you hate signing them.’

He pointed to the decanter.

‘Help yourself, my friend. This sacrifice is worth a libation.’

§ 2

The room was lined from floor to ceiling with books. Over by the window, in front of which the curtains were drawn, stood a writing-table with bronze griffins at its feet. Savary, looking towards it, perceived that the chair behind it was empty, though the desk was littered.

‘At last!’ came a voice behind him.

Savary wheeled about and saluted, forgetting that he was in plain clothes. The Emperor was sitting on the green sofa near the mantelpiece. Behind him the busts of Scipio and Hannibal were white smudges in the candle-light.

‘When did you arrive?’

‘Ten minutes ago, sir.’

‘You have ridden post?’

‘From Vittoria, sir.’

Napoleon made a quick sign of dismissal with his right hand. A shadow in the background, behind the sofa, rose and disappeared silently by the private stair

leading to the Emperor's bedroom above. Savary noted the gesture with satisfaction. Not even Méneval was to remain.

'I reached Paris myself only last night,' Napoleon continued. 'You have made good time on the road.'

'It was necessary, sir, that I should.'

'I imagine you come direct from my brother?'

'Yes, sir. His Majesty sent me to give you information about the situation in Spain.'

'I shall be glad to have it.'

Napoleon rose as he spoke and walked over to Savary, halting about a yard away and looking up at him. Savary perceived that there would be no pulling of the ear. The Emperor was obviously not in a genial mood.

'It was time I had news from my brother,' he said sharply. 'Yesterday I sent off Berthier to Bayonne. I must have in detail plans of the Ebro from Tudela to Frias. I must also know what is the condition of the roads from Vittoria to Logroño.'

He broke off and looked at the worn figure standing to attention in front of him.

'But you, perhaps, can tell me of them,' he added grimly.

'Yes, sir.'

'Tell me everything. What bridges on the Ebro are occupied? Is it true that my brother has evacuated the whole of the right bank? Is the enemy in Burgos? Are there any troops left in the citadel? Or has it been destroyed?'

He paused again and his face darkened.

'Why am I kept in ignorance? I know nothing of what my brother has done, except that it is bad. I cannot understand why his staff do not send me details.'

Napoleon jerked his head.

'I have not had a single report from the generals on the spot. How can I be expected to understand the situation? Have you lists of the killed and wounded in the last engagement?'

Savary shrank from the battery of questions. The long roads of France, dusty at first, but giving way to mud as he had come north, still swam before his eyes, ribbons unravelling with the motion of his horse. He was too tired to think. Yet there was the Emperor, needing his full attention, not in the height of passion as he had often seen him, but in a cold, quiet mood, infinitely more angry and dangerous.

'I must have all the particulars. The staff should be writing me at least three pages every day.'

'I am instructed to give a general picture of the situation, sir.'

'In other words you will tell me what my brother thinks of it. It does not matter in the least what he thinks. Have you no details?'

'I can give Your Majesty the situation of the troops.'

'That is something.'

The Emperor turned away and then swung sharply round. 'You are tired?'

'I have ridden post, sir.'

'Sit down, Savary.'

The Emperor pointed abruptly to the sofa.

'Some wine?'

'No, sir. I thank you.'

Savary sat down.

'Now, what is the situation?'

Savary leaned forward, spreading out his hands.

'The left wing of the army was at Lerida in the east when I left, sir. The right wing, under the Duke

of Danzig and Marshal Victor . . .’

‘I know the names of those in command.’

‘. . . were marching west to attack the Spaniards under Blake. They were reported to be on the outskirts of Bilbao. General Villate is at Valmaseda.’

The Emperor was leaning over his desk, spreading a large map beneath his hands:

‘Lerida . . . Bilbao . . . Valmaseda,’ Savary heard him mutter. ‘It could hardly be worse. Why was the army concentrated around Vittoria?’

Savary remained silent. Napoleon glanced at him sharply.

‘What is the condition of the troops?’

‘Bad, sir, I am afraid. There is a great shortage of clothing and boots and the winter promises to be severe, so the local people say.’

Napoleon looked up from the map.

‘All this is scandalous,’ he said and rang a small bronze bell on the desk. A face appeared from among the shadows about the Emperor’s private door and Méneval moved silently to his desk.

‘Take this at once for Déjean:

‘The army in Spain has been treated shamefully. They must have 50,000 greatcoats and 120,000 pairs of boots within the month. Do you expect my army to go into battle naked? The conscripts are not clothed. Your reports are waste paper. It is useless merely to send convoys. They must be despatched regularly under an officer or a clerk. Then they would arrive.’

Napoleon paused a moment, shuffled the papers on his desk and selected two.

‘Enclosed you will find letters from the Prefect of the Gironde and a report from Inspector Dufrêne. You will see from these that all is robbery and peculation. I have spent a great deal of money and I might just as well have thrown it into

the sea. The Commissioner is not to be relied upon. He has acted disgracefully and you must send someone else. I will have no contracts. You know that contracts produce nothing but robbery. I shall annul the contract for clothing at Bordeaux. Act on the principle that every contractor is a thief and that the best plan is always to make things for yourself. Send a director to make clothing on my account. He will receive from the Prefect all the assistance he needs, including a workshop and an adequate number of workmen. He must have three or four master tailors under him and there must be three field officers at Bordeaux to receive clothing and check its quality. Give the new Commissioner sufficient funds and see that he is a man who will stake his reputation on the success of his commission. If he goes about it properly, there will be no difficulty in finishing the work. If you had acted thus from the beginning, all would now be well. Once more, I repeat, I will have no contracts.'

The sharp voice ceased and Méneval withdrew.

'Now,' said the Emperor, 'what of the spirit of the troops?'

'That also is bad, sir,' answered Savary bluntly. 'They seem to have lost heart and, if Your Majesty will permit me, I think I know the reason.'

He paused, afraid suddenly of what he had to say.

'Yes,' snapped the Emperor.

'Your Majesty's brother,' continued Savary, 'dislikes the situation in which he finds himself.'

'You mean that he does not inspire confidence?'

'He has neither the talents nor the energy of Your Majesty.'

'I never imagined that he had. But he has Lefebvre, Victor and Ney to help him, not to mention some ninety thousand men of the Grand Army. Savary, do you realise I have transferred to Spain my best troops, the finest troops in the world? Yet they do nothing . . . nothing.'

Napoleon sat down abruptly at his desk. Absently

he took up a penknife and began whittling at the arms of his chair. For a moment the only sound in the room was the scraping of the blade. Suddenly he threw down the knife and made to speak again. At that moment, however, the door opened.

‘Yes?’ he said sharply.

‘Forgive me, sir.’

It was Duroc who came forward into the candle-light.

‘I have urgent news for Your Majesty.’

‘What is it?’

Duroc turned and looked at Savary.

‘Perhaps,’ he began doubtfully.

‘Never mind Savary. He is from my brother Joseph with the latest news from Spain.’

Savary leaned forward. What was the matter with Duroc? He was a solemn fellow at the best of times, but there was now a look on his face which Savary had not seen before. For one moment, so brief that the feeling was hardly alive before it died, Savary was afraid.

‘Sir,’ said Duroc, ‘I do not think Your Majesty can be aware of the conduct at Erfurt of Monsieur de Talleyrand.’

Savary sat back. The conduct of Talleyrand! This was an old tale.

‘Talleyrand?’ snapped Napoleon. ‘I have no doubt that he has put more feathers in his nest.’

‘Sir, it is serious. It seems that every day he took tea with the Princess Turm and Taxis.’

The Emperor laughed harshly.

‘Treason in tea-cups. Is that what you mean? The Princess is sister, is she not, to the Queen of Prussia? Not a very dangerous connection.’

‘The Princess is an intimate friend, sir, of the Czar of Russia.’

Napoleon looked up sharply, the smile wiped from his lips.

‘Did he, too, take tea with the Princess? They were in the habit of meeting?’

‘Night after night, sir.’

‘Why was I not informed of this at the time?’

‘I only learned it, sir, myself an hour ago.’

‘Have you reason to believe that these meetings were not in my interest?’

‘My informant heard only the last of the conversations.’

‘Well?’

Duroc flushed. His voice was heavy with indignation.

‘First it was clear that Talleyrand, far from urging the Czar to fulfil his obligations towards Your Majesty, was working to ensure his neutrality.’

‘What else?’

‘The Czar sought advice upon Your Majesty’s proposed alliance with his sister. Talleyrand counselled him to entertain the project, but not to embrace it.’

Napoleon flung up his head and turned down the room. Savary watched him carefully. The Emperor needed that gesture to contain himself. He came back to them outwardly cool.

‘That releases me from the Russian she-bear. In any case I doubt if she would serve our turn. They’re a poor lot, these Romanoffs; a bad stock to breed from.’

He stopped suddenly.

‘But the Austrian business? Have you more to tell me of that?’

‘Just this, Your Majesty. The Czar has written to the Emperor Francis a personal letter, in his own hand, informing him that he need be under no apprehension.’

'It was on the advice of Talleyrand that he did this?'

'Undoubtedly, sir.'

Napoleon reached the end of the room and turned. Duroc spoke again.

'Such a letter will be read in Vienna as an invitation to move. Consider, sir. Austria is said to have a hundred thousand men already with the colours.'

Duroc hesitated.

'Well? Speak your mind.'

'I think, sir, you should not, in the light of these events, take the army to Spain.'

'The army is already in Spain.'

'Then Your Majesty cannot keep it there.'

The Emperor, pausing in his walk, turned and faced them both.

'Duroc, I shall leave tomorrow.'

'But, Your Majesty——'

'I shall reach Bayonne on the third. I shall take over the army at Tolosa on the following day.'

He was back at the desk now, sprawling in a familiar pose over the map.

'No. Not at Tolosa. I shall reach Vittoria at nightfall. You, Savary, must ride ahead. Tell my brother to have relays of saddle-horses from Villafranca onwards. Make it clear that I do not wish to ride the same horse for more than twelve miles. I shall enter Vittoria secretly at about nine o'clock in the evening. The army is not to know of my arrival till the morning after. At nine o'clock on November the sixth a salute of sixty guns will announce my presence.'

'I have warned Your Majesty,' Duroc began again. 'This news——'

The Emperor turned on him swiftly.

'Have you considered what it means? Austria will strike when she is ready. I have known it from

the first. Talleyrand could not prevent it if he wished. He always follows the event and plays for his own hand. I have only one course. I must settle Spain before Austria can move. I might have had six months. I have less than three. Therefore I must go at once. I shall have the army back on the Danube before Francis has made up his mind.'

He paused and his expression changed as his eye fell on the solemn, protesting face of Duroc. He stepped up to the Grand Marshal and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Cheer up, Duroc. Austria is always late. There will be time enough.'

'And what of Talleyrand?' demanded Duroc harshly.

Savary looked for an outbreak. But the Emperor had ceased to smile and that was all. His eyes were hard and bright.

'Talleyrand must not suspect that I am aware of his treachery. Otherwise he will feel himself to be in danger. First I must settle Spain. Till then my enemies must have no warning. They must feel secure till I am ready to deal with them. You agree with me, Savary?'

'Talleyrand, sir, is dangerous.'

'Therefore he must not be frightened.'

Napoleon broke off and smiled again upon Duroc.

'If you must do something,' he began.

'Yes, Your Majesty?'

'Tell Fouché to keep him in view. He will enjoy the commission.'

The Emperor paused.

'How did you get this information?' he added suddenly.

'From young Marbot, sir. He overheard the conversation.'

‘How did he manage that?’

‘He was with the Princess in her bedroom when Talleyrand and the Czar were announced.’

Napoleon burst into a laugh.

‘These princesses. . . . Well, I don’t suppose they’re different in bed from other women. I shall know, perhaps, one of these days. Keep an eye on that young man. He seems useful . . . devoted.’

‘We are all devoted, sir.’

Savary realised that he had spoken aloud and that the Emperor was looking towards him.

A plump hand came out and Savary felt a premonitory tingling in his ear. It was a shrewd pinch, but his heart was glowing.

§ 3

The rain was violent upon the ilex and fig trees climbing the slope towards the palace at Caserta and the drops beat with the regularity of drum taps on the tight canvas of the toy tent in the garden. Caroline Murat, from the window, noted the tent with disapproval. It should have been removed when the storm came, but Neapolitan servants were as incompetent as they were obliging, relying on bright smiles and soft answers to turn away wrath.

In her hand was an open letter. She tilted the page more steeply towards the light as she read for the third time the firm but almost indecipherable writing. There was one name that jumped to her eye from the black scrawl: Fouché. A child could read it. Had it been less clear, it would have been incredible.

Talleyrand asked her to hold herself in readiness and Fouché had countersigned the request. In readiness for what? Had she, they asked, sounded

her husband? Was Murat, King of Naples, prepared to accept a higher destiny? Her mind went back to the dusty road, outside the park at Valençay, where she had talked with Talleyrand. That, it now seemed, had been the first move in a game which she was to play not only with Talleyrand but with Fouché for a partner.

She folded the paper quickly and put it away as the door opened suddenly and a boy of five or six ran into the room. His small face was red with passion. He was dressed in a coat of blue velvet and a plumed hat. But Caroline did not think him ridiculous.

'Mother, Baudus is a beast. He won't let me go into the garden.'

'It is raining, Achille,' said Caroline, laying her hand as she spoke on the boy's shoulder. Achille shook himself free.

'I want to go into the garden. I want to play in the tent. I am the Emperor. He is in his tent and tomorrow will be Austerlitz.'

'Your uncle did not sleep in a tent. He slept in a farm-house.'

The boy looked up at her as she bent down towards him. His face was swarthy. They were a dark-skinned race, the Murats.

'May I go into the garden?'

'Not now. It is raining.'

Achille doubled his fists.

'I want to go into the garden.'

'I've told you that it is raining,' said Caroline sharply.

The boy looked at her a moment. Then defiantly he began running towards the door. Caroline, stepping forward, struck him smartly over the ears. The boy turned and struck back. She took up a bell on the table and rang it sharply. It was still in her

hand when the door opened.

'Take him away, Baudus. He is not to go into the garden. Shut him up if he screams.'

'Certainly, Majesty. Come, Monseigneur.'

'I want to go into the garden.'

'Not now, Monseigneur.'

Baudus took the small boy by the hand, who uttered a scream of rage. The tutor dragged him over the marble floor. Caroline watched the scene impatiently. Then, as the boy's screams were abruptly shut off by the closed door, she turned and moved to the other end of the room.

Meanwhile the door had opened and a lady-in-waiting stood curtsying.

'You rang, Majesty?'

Caroline was about to tell her that it was not to summon her lady-in-waiting that she had rung the bell. Then she paused. She would not go to Murat. It would be better if he came to her.

'Inform His Majesty,' she said, 'that I desire to speak with him in my room in ten minutes' time.'

The girl bowed and withdrew.

Caroline turned and entered her bedroom. A shaft of sunshine fell on the floor at her feet as she moved to the window. The clouds were rolling away above the Gulf of Naples. She stood a moment looking out. The sea, still driven by the wind, was covered with flecks of white. A great cloud had been torn aside above Posilippo. The town was at her feet, grey except where the sunlight struck it. From between the houses, black trees stood up stiffly. Near at hand a pine was in silhouette. The sun grew stronger.

Caroline climbed into the wide bed and leaned against the embroidered pillows. She pulled Talley-

rand's letter from between her breasts and thrust it beneath the coverlet of rose-coloured satin. Then she picked up a hand-mirror and looked at her face, putting straight the cap on her head. She leaned further back upon her pillows. 'A rosebud hidden in a confusion of lace.' Junot had said that and for him she had tried to look it. But for Joachim?

The door swung open and her husband entered.

He was wearing a coat of green velvet, heavily frogged with gold and on his feet were red leather boots with golden tassels. His sullen face cleared as he reached the edge of the bed and stood looking down at her.

'Well?' he said. 'What is it?'

Caroline looked wantonly at the empty place beside her.

'There is a Cabinet meeting in half an hour,' grumbled Murat. 'Business first, though by God you're a handsome piece.'

Caroline put a hand to her white forehead.

'No business for me,' she protested. 'You must make my excuses.'

Murat caressed the heavy shoulder that lay to his hand.

'You sent for me to give me my orders?'

Caroline shook her head.

'I am not interested in the affairs of Naples.'

He stood looking down at her.

'I wish I could say the same of your brother,' he said.

He picked up an alabaster jar beside her bed.

'Don't do that,' said Caroline sharply. 'You will break it.'

He appeared not to have heard her, however, and she did not repeat the warning. She must be careful

how she handled him. Apparently the time was propitious, for he broke out violently:

‘I’m supposed to be King of Naples, but the people here look upon me as a usurer. Why should they be made to pay for the Emperor’s wars in Spain? If I must be a king, let me at least be popular.’

‘You will never be popular, my poor Joachim, ruling under the Emperor. He uses you like the other poor little kings. You are his sponges. You suck your kingdom dry so that he may squeeze you afterwards.’

Murat set down the alabaster pot with a violent gesture.

‘Am I King of Naples, or am I not? He is driving me insane. Every courier brings me fresh instructions. My battalions, if you please, are not up to strength. Of course they are not, and never will be. Doesn’t he yet realise that the Italians are not soldiers and never will be? What does it matter whether a regiment has two hundred or two thousand men? Two thousand will take a little longer to run away, that is all. But they are a pleasant people, Caroline, and I don’t see why they should pay for other people’s quarrels.’

He paused for lack of breath. Caroline sat up among her pillows. Was he sufficiently provoked? Or should she push him perhaps a little further.

‘The trade reports are bad?’ she asked quietly.

Murat’s face turned a darker red.

‘You know them better than I do. You are always studying the returns, such as they are. What trade can there be, with the British fleet riding up and down the coast and the Bourbons in Sicily?’

Caroline looked at him long enough to waken expectation.

'Well,' she said at last. 'Naples is not everything.'

'Naples is my kingdom, for the present.'

'It may not always be your kingdom.'

'You mean that, if I don't bleed the people white to fill your brother's purse and send up all the young men to fill his armies, he will take Naples away from me. That's what you mean, isn't it? Let him do as he pleases. God knows, I never wanted the place. He knows I never wanted it.'

'You wanted Spain, didn't you, Joachim?'

Her tone was light, but significant.

'I was a fool. Spain is not a bed of roses. It will be the end of brother Joseph.'

'It may be the end of more than brother Joseph. Napoleon has had to go to Spain himself.'

Murat looked dubiously at his wife.

'You think I ought to join him. Lead his cavalry again? Is that what you think? You want to send me off to the wars? That, at least, would be a man's work. Suit me better than kicking my heels in this beastly country.'

Caroline thrust out a full white arm and laid her hand upon his wrist.

'I don't want you to go to the wars, Joachim. Just stop grumbling and think a minute.'

How stupid he seemed! Why did Talleyrand look to him of all men? Fouché, too. Swiftly she answered her own question. 'It is to me they look.'

'Joachim,' she said sharply, 'Napoleon is in Spain. Have you ever wondered what we should do if he were never to return?'

Murat flung off her hand impatiently.

'Of course he will return.'

She decided to let him have it point-blank.

‘ Suppose he returns on a gun carriage? ’

There was a long silence. Murat puckered his lips in a silent whistle. Then he scratched his cheek.

‘ Well,’ she added impatiently, ‘ what should we do? ’

There was a high colour in her cheeks. It flooded the rose and pink of her throat. He looked down at her uneasily.

‘ We could do nothing here,’ he said.

‘ But in Paris.’

Caroline thrust her hand beneath the coverlet.

‘ Read that.’

She offered him the letter. He sat down heavily on the bed to read it. When he had finished he thrust it back upon her violently.

‘ This smells bad,’ he said. ‘ I am a faithful servant of the Emperor.’

‘ The Emperor will need a successor. Who better than a faithful servant? ’

‘ By God, Caroline, no one can say you lack ambition.’

His tone accused her of something worse, but she saw the light in his eyes and knew that all was well. He would be ruled and, if necessary, overruled.

‘ There is one thing you can do,’ she said. ‘ Be ready to ride to Paris. It is quicker to go by land than by sea. Give orders for relays of horses to be posted in case of need.’

Joachim rose to his feet. His face had brightened at the word.

‘ Horses,’ he muttered.

§ 4

‘ I see here the name of Madame Regnault de Saint-Jean-d’Angély. I do not wish to invite her.’

Pauline Borghese propped herself upon an elbow and looked resentfully at Duroc. He stood sturdily in front of her, looking most unlike a courtier, though he was in full dress and carrying out his duties of Grand Marshal of the Palace.

‘In view of her husband’s position,’ he began.

‘What do I care for her husband’s position. She is too pretty. She will put our noses out of joint.’

Duroc smiled and bowed stiffly.

‘I would point out that, your Imperial Highness being present, no one is likely to look elsewhere.’

‘It would be even better if no one had anywhere else to look.’

‘I am sorry, madam; the Emperor’s order is explicit.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me so at once? I never dispute an order. But the woman is tiresome. She is so proud of her Grecian profile that she never lets anyone see anything else? Have you noticed, Duroc, how she enters a drawing-room. She walks sideways like a crab?’

Pauline bent again over the paper which Duroc had spread before her on the table.

‘What is the use of my looking at this list?’ she protested. ‘If the Emperor has approved it, there is no more to be said.’

‘It was one of the last papers he approved before he set out for Spain,’ answered Duroc.

Pauline looked it over and, crushing it in her hand, struck a bell on the table. A maid appeared.

‘Louise, tell Paul I am ready to be carried to my bath.’

She looked with a half smile at Duroc as she gave the order.

‘You have seen Paul? He is magnificent. It is a

picture when he lowers me with his black arms into the milk. Canova should carve him in ebony and the rest should be in ivory or alabaster.'

Duroc stood stiffly at attention.

'I have heard the story, madam. I have even had to inform the Emperor that it was a libel upon your Imperial Highness.'

'Story. What story?'

'That your Imperial Highness suffers herself to be carried to her bath by a negro manservant. The practice is considered by some to be not entirely respectable.'

'Nonsense, Duroc. Paul is not to be considered as a man. He carries me as he would carry my statue yonder. You shall see for yourself.'

'Your Imperial Highness honours me too highly.'

'The Grand Marshal fears for his reputation,' she laughed. 'However, one must, I suppose, be respectable. It is an order. So Paul shall marry Louise and she also shall be present and we shall then be above suspicion.'

Duroc still stood unsmiling. The Princess laughed in his face.

'Go home, Duroc, and tell your wife that you declined my invitation. I hope to see you both at my party this evening.'

She passed into the next room. Lying across her bed was the dress she had chosen for the evening. The maid took off her gown and the single petticoat of lawn she wore next her skin. She glanced sideways at the long mirror beside her dressing-table. To say that her left leg was not quite symmetrical with her right was a malicious invention. She was perfect. All the world should know. Posterity should know.

Standing by the door was Paul. He looked

gigantic. He was naked to the waist and his arms were folded. She would hate to affront that splendid figure if she were not herself as perfect. She signed him forward. He came and lifted her. She lay back in his arms, feeling at peace and utterly without blemish. They passed into the alcove where the bath of milk awaited her, warm, smooth, smelling faint and sweet.

Ten minutes later, bathed and relaxed, she stood again with her maid before the mirror. The dress laid out for her was of rose-coloured tulle through which her milk-whitened skin would be apparent. The long toilet proceeded according to established ritual. But when the dress was in place, it had to be removed, for she decided at the last moment that the linen shift beneath it obscured the warm light of her body and there was really no need to wear it.

Once more the tulle dress was lifted above her head and pinned into place.

Then came the business of her hair. But it did not take long. Studied confusion was the extreme of fashion and she would make the fashion last if she could, for it became her well and saved much time.

She took a last look at herself in the glass. The dress fell to her ankles, set off with pale pink ostrich feathers held in place by diamond pins. From the waist fell a sheaf of silk ribbons, and the whole front of the dress was sewn with brilliants suggesting crystallised raindrops. Louise placed upon her head three ostrich feathers, secured by a diamond circlet. Her slightest movement caused all her body from the waist upwards to glitter from a hundred points. She was a walking flame of ice. It needed supreme beauty to carry off such a dress successfully. She knew that she had it.

A discreet knock upon the door was answered by

one of her maids-of-honour.

‘Many guests are already present, Your Imperial Highness.’

Pauline continued to gaze at herself in the mirror, touching her hair and passing two fingers over the rounded smoothness of her chin. Then she turned and picked up the paper with the list of names upon it lying on her dressing-table. One name caught her eye as it travelled, Countess Marie Walewska. She had put down the name herself and Napoleon had not crossed it off. Yet the list was headed by Her Imperial Majesty the Empress. Pauline smiled. She would watch those two when they met. Picking up a small fan of ostrich feathers, she left her boudoir and, preceded by the Chamberlain, moved down a short corridor at the end of which a pair of double doors were flung open.

‘Her Imperial Highness the Princess Borghese,’ announced the Chamberlain.

§ 5

There were too many people for comfort. But that was inevitable. The Wednesdays of Princess Borghese were very fashionable. Fouché wished that the Emperor had chosen some material lighter than velvet for ministerial dress. The weight and thickness of his coat was intolerable.

But at least he would not be expected to dance. These new waltzes were quite beyond him. Moving away from the ballroom in search of a cooling drink, he reached a door half draped by a curtain and saw the Empress. Josephine, fanning herself, looked tired. There was too much colour in her cheeks. She caught sight of him and beckoned him forward.

She was seated on a low sofa, partly concealed by the curtain hanging over the door through which he had hoped to escape. Fouché, as he sat down, however, was no longer thinking of the drink which he had desired a moment before. This was his opportunity.

He sat back and looked covertly at the Empress, considering how best to approach her. Josephine, however, interrupted his thoughts.

'How do you think my sister-in-law is looking tonight?' she asked.

Her eyes were bright with malice. Fouché, well aware of the hatred between them, wondered what mischief was afoot.

'Princess Pauline,' he said at last, 'always looks as well as she can.'

'I have prepared a little surprise for her, Fouché.'

'Yes, Majesty?'

'It is the new edition of the Imperial Almanack. I have arranged that it should be brought to her notice. Poor de Thiais has made a shocking blunder. He gives the date of her birth as 1779. But the Princess, my dear Fouché, was born in 1780.'

'A most unfortunate blunder,' he murmured. 'But is it serious?'

'You ask me that? To give her an extra twelve months. You will soon see how serious it is.'

The Empress was looking across the room at a group of figures in blue and white at the far end, officers, mostly of the Guard, or such of it as was not in Spain with the Emperor, satellites now of the rosy planet that was Pauline Borghese.

Fouché waited. He had nothing to say concerning the Princess, and his eyes wandered down the room till they lighted on the woman he had in mind. Soon she

came into view, all in white. Her dress, very simple, was caught up high beneath the breasts with a silver belt. On her yellow hair rested a silver chaplet of oak-leaves. She was turning featly in the arms of Monsieur Lavalette, the fat but nimble Director General of the Post Office and a firm friend, Fouché reflected, of his master. He stole a glance at the Empress. She too was looking at Walewska.

‘It would interest me to know,’ he said softly, ‘exactly why Countess Walewska went suddenly to Erfurt.’

‘Is it common knowledge that she went?’

‘To me only, madam, and to certain members of my service. That also applies to another fact of which I have been informed.’

‘Namely?’

‘That before leaving for Erfurt she had an interview with Your Majesty.’

‘You know everything, Fouché.’

Josephine closed her fan and dropped it on her lap.

‘I have this in common with Walewska,’ she continued. ‘We neither of us want a Russian Empress on the throne of France.’

Fouché smiled. So that was why Walewska had gone to Josephine. These women were a day behind the fair.

‘I can reassure Your Majesty on that point,’ he said. ‘The event is most improbable.’

§ 6

The music was barely audible. The candles shone discreetly on the green table and the scattered cards.

‘Lucky tonight, Charles.’

‘ I am sorry, as much for myself as for you. It is tedious to win so easily.’

Talleyrand tilted his head back and looked at his handsome friend. Montrond made a light gesture with his hands, as though he would show the emptiness of his pockets. Then he smiled.

‘ You will play cards on your deathbed, Charles.’

‘ Who can resist them?’

‘ Or the green table? That explains, perhaps, your success in diplomacy. Your kings, queens and knaves are mere effigies to be shuffled and cut.’

‘ My poor friend, you are becoming sententious.’

‘ Forgive me, Charles. Losers are permitted to moralise.’

‘ Do not suggest that I play with kingdoms. That is a game for my master. I am only his servant. Sometimes he uses the diplomacy of arms; then he sends for his marshals. Sometimes he prefers the arms of diplomacy; then he sends for me.’

‘ It is hot in here. I will get you a drink.’

‘ There’s a good fellow, and leave the door open.’

Talleyrand, seated alone by the card table, watched the scene in the ballroom from a distance. The couples swung into his field of vision and away again, young, warm and brilliant. Inevitably he began to recall similar scenes of former years. There had been little real change, he reflected, since the Revolution. This ball tonight might have been given by Barras or Tallien. Only in those days men and women danced with curious movements of the head. Talleyrand’s lips curved in distaste as he recalled the motive of that gesture. Those who had lost some relative by the guillotine alone had made it. Now they danced faster, turning like tops to the new waltz measures. They kept their heads rigid and the men moved in a

more military fashion. But for these unessential differences they might still be the 'incredibles' of the nineties. His mind went back to the Rue du Bac and the great ball he had given to celebrate the return of Bonaparte from Italy in '98. That had cost him a pretty penny and much reflection. It had been his own idea to scent the rooms with ambergris. And the cards of invitation. Talleyrand smiled. He had worded the little sentence so carefully: 'You will feel it right, I am sure, to deny yourself the wearing of any materials of English manufacture.' That same sentence had since been used in all the drawing-rooms of Paris.

And the dresses of the women. Dresses à la Flore, à la Vesta; tunics à la Cérès, the stuffs made of muslin or gauze. Truly the *merveilleuses* had deserved their title and his own epigram quoted in all the cafés: 'Women permit us now to do more than suspect their charms.'

Time passed and he was beginning to wonder what had become of Montrond when a light figure entered the room on the arm of ugly, bald Monsieur Lavalette. There was a silver belt about her waist and silver oak-leaves on her hair.

'Madam will you allow me to find you a *sorbet*?'

'There is nothing I should like better, my dear Director.'

Marie Walewskasank, as shespoke, into an armchair.

Neither of them, Talleyrand observed, had noticed him, and indeed the light from the candles on the mantelpiece was low after the glare of the ballroom. Lavalette bowed and moved away. Marie began to flutter her fan. Talleyrand considered her before speaking. A beautiful face, he decided. The wide-set blue eyes beneath the dark brows gave it an air of

distinction and race. He had seen faces like that in the old days in the rooms at Versailles and for a moment he felt a sudden, blinding hatred for the glare and trumpets of the Empire.

‘Perhaps you will permit me, Countess, to entertain you in the absence of Monsieur Lavalette?’

He was on his feet bowing.

She turned slowly and looked at him. There was a change in her face, a slight narrowing of the eyes. But he was used to that. The faces of the Emperor’s friends usually changed when Talleyrand spoke to them. He limped forward and sat down opposite her on a stuffed upright armchair covered with blue brocade. He would take her by surprise.

‘You had a pleasant journey, I trust, madam, back from Erfurt?’

Her eyes were steady above her flickering fan.

‘Not very pleasant, I am afraid, Prince,’ she answered quietly. ‘The roads were appalling until we passed Strasbourg.’

It was as though he had asked her whether she had enjoyed her drive that morning in the Champs Élysées.

The attack by surprise had failed, but could not be abandoned.

‘There were many parties, even more splendid than this, at Erfurt. I regret that I did not see you at any of them, Countess.’

‘Since you are so well informed, Monsieur de Talleyrand, you must be aware that at Erfurt I was incognita.’

‘I knew that also, madam. I was merely regretting the circumstance.’

‘Presumably you also know why I went to Erfurt.’

‘I have sometimes allowed myself to wonder.’

‘I will satisfy your curiosity, Prince. I had heard rumours of a Russian marriage. It did not please me that the Emperor should be seeking that alliance.’

‘Nor apparently did it please the Empress. You work together?’

‘My relations with the Empress,’ began Walewska.

‘. . . augur well for the peace of the Imperial household. I congratulate you, madam. Still more do I congratulate the Emperor.’

‘You do not blame me, Monsieur de Talleyrand?’

‘I understand you, madam.’

‘As far as I intended.’

‘Further would be presumptuous.’

‘Ah, here is Monsieur Lavalette with my *sorbet*.’

Walewska turned with shining eyes to the Director General of the Post Office.

§ 7

‘You press me too hard. Really, I cannot sing tonight.’

The voice of Pauline rang clear above the general hubbub and Marie Walewska, on the arm of Monsieur Lavalette, halted. Her encounter with Talleyrand had left her exhilarated and for the moment she almost shared her lover’s tolerant contempt of his disloyalty. His treachery was known, yet Napoleon had left him free to limp through the drawing-rooms of Paris. Had she become infected with the spirit of the Emperor? Something of his flashing opportunism possessed her tonight. For the moment she could do nothing but take what life seemed to be holding out to her with both hands, take it without reserve and yet advance warily, for there was no sound footing anywhere.

Talleyrand knew that she had been to Erfurt,

though he had not seen her there and had not known the purpose of her visit. Let him believe that her motive had been such as he could understand.

She stood, caught in the crush, with her hand still on the arm of Lavalette, looking at Princess Pauline receiving with flushed cheeks the boorish homage of the garrison of Paris.

'No, really,' came the high excited voice of Pauline, 'I am not in voice tonight.'

'Madam, we beseech you. Be our nightingale.'

'Nightingales do not sing in November.'

'If that be a fact, disprove it, madam.'

Marie listened to the flow of compliments. None seemed more eager than Casimir de Montrond, the friend of Talleyrand, who was leaning over the back of the couch on which Pauline Borghese reclined in her famous attitude.

'*Sempre saro costante*,' Marie heard him suggest, as he bent over the lovely figure.

The Princess appeared to hesitate and Montrond made a scarcely perceptible sign to de Clermont Tonnerre, who nodded and, with his fellow chamberlain, de Montbreton, began to push his way through the group.

'Silence, please.'

The two chamberlains were moving round the ball-room.

'Her Imperial Highness will sing for us.'

The director of the Princess's private orchestra, the Italian composer, Blangini, moved towards the piano with his music. On his way he passed the Empress. She beckoned him forward.

'What is the song?' she asked. 'Let me see.'

Blangini offered the book. Josephine turned the leaves a moment and handed it back with a smile.

The Princess was already on her feet. With the help of two eager gentlemen she climbed the dais on which the orchestra was seated, while the dancers moved to the long backless sofas beneath the walls.

Marie felt a warning pressure from Lavalette. At the same moment he released her arm and she saw that he was bowing, a trifle clumsily. Most of the men were clumsy in this society into which the Emperor had thrust her—Mars, in relaxation, tumbling over the petticoats of Venus.

‘Come and sit beside me.’

She perceived that Josephine was smiling from a sofa on which she sat alone. There was a strange glitter in her looks.

Marie seated herself obediently beside the older woman. It amused her to see how elaborately the men and women who were nearest affected not to notice the invitation. The faces about her were all expressionless. Yet it was easy to read what was in their minds. The Empress, since she could not be rid of the Walewska, was making the best of it like a sensible woman. Marie wondered at herself. She should have felt indignant. What she really felt was a hard indifference. Let them think what they pleased.

Josephine was leaning towards her.

‘Watch this, Marie. It will be amusing.’

The painted lips curled back a moment showing the teeth behind.

Pauline stood now with her back to the piano, on which Blangini was executing preliminary flourishes which gradually gave way to the air she was to sing. She held in front of her a music book bound in vellum with the Borghese arms stamped upon it in gold.

She lifted up her voice.

'*Sempre saro costante, sempre l'adorer,*' she sang.

The tone was true, though a trifle thin. She repeated the last phrase, skilfully assisted by Blangini. Then suddenly on the word '*sempre*' she paused, flushed and was inarticulate. Marie felt the hideous embarrassment of an auditor when something goes wrong on the stage. A man in dragoon uniform got clumsily to his feet. Monsieur de Montbreton, the Chamberlain, started towards the dais. Blangini repeated the phrase and gave the singer the note persuasively. But the Princess would have none of it. She was staring with eyes of fury at the sheet of music in front of her. The lips of the Empress were parted. Her whole face expressed malice triumphant.

'It is a little surprise I have arranged for her,' she said aside to Marie. 'You do not know, perhaps, but Monsieur de Thiais, editor of the Imperial Almanack, has misdated her. It seemed a pity that she should not be informed as soon as possible.'

Meanwhile Pauline had laid down the music and Blangini's accompaniment had ceased. A few feeble claps crepitated round the ballroom. Pauline was looking point-blank at the Empress. For one brief instant her face was contorted. But swiftly it changed to a heavenly sweetness.

'It is no use,' she said, shaking her head. 'I told you I was not in voice.'

Murmurs of protest rose from the officers at the foot of the dais. Pauline raised her hand.

'Not in singing voice,' she corrected. 'But if you would like me to recite . . .'

There was a murmur which swelled to a roar of delighted approbation.

'Love, gentlemen,' continued the Princess. 'What

theme could be more suitable for one of my sex? '

The room was still again.

' I will remind you,' continued Pauline, ' of the love of Petrarch for Laura.'

And she began to declaim softly and then more loudly:

*' Le Vommi il mio pensiero in parte ovvera
Quella ch'io cerca è piu non trova in terra.
Ivi fra lor ch'al terzio cerchio serra
La rividi più bella è men altera.'*

Her voice was musical. Walewska felt strangely moved.

*' Che fai? Che pensi? . . . Che pur indietro guardi
Nel tempo che tornar non puote omai,
Amma sconsolata!'*

If Pauline had a soul, she was sighing it away. Blangini, cleverly increasing the effect, accompanied the voice with a few modulations. Pauline stood on the platform, her head high, her right hand outstretched, and the diamond drops glittered and wept from the rose-coloured tulle.

The voice died away. There was a moment's silence. Then came the applause, loud and triumphant. Josephine began mechanically to clap her hands. Then she flicked open her fan again and said suddenly:

' Who has been talking to Fouché? He knows of your visit to me and of your journey to Erfurt. Have you seen him? '

' I have not said a word to Monsieur Fouché. I believed till this evening that my visit to Erfurt was a secret from everyone.'

' Do you think it possible to keep such a secret? '

' My servants speak scarcely any French, Majesty, and they are completely trustworthy. So also is Monsieur Marbot.'

Josephine shrugged her shoulders.

'No one can keep a secret from Fouché,' she answered indifferently.

Marie sat back. Should she tell the Empress that Talleyrand also knew of her visit? She turned, half in mind to do so, but at that moment Josephine rose. Marie rose, too, and was claimed by Lieutenant de Brack, a young artillery officer who was reputed to be one of her hostess's many lovers.

She danced with him mechanically, her mind on other things.

So Fouché also knew. But he, of course, knew everything. His police were everywhere.

But Talleyrand? How had he come by it? Was it a coincidence that they should both be so well informed? Was it by chance that they should both have revealed almost simultaneously their interest in the matter?

Fouché . . . Talleyrand. Talleyrand . . . Fouché. The names jingled in her head to the music.

Fouché and Talleyrand. . . .

•

CHAPTER XII

§ 1

To Philip de Ségur, riding behind the Emperor on the road to Castile, it seemed that their progress had lost all significant purpose. Presumably there was a reason why he should follow, hour after hour, the figure just in front of him. But all sense of it was lost. All he feared was that the mechanism which had kept him going since daybreak might run down.

The road had once been tolerable, but now its surface was scarred by the heavy wheels which had passed over it during the last three months. Holes, full to the brim with water and reflecting the pale sky, retained patches of the light which was fading slowly towards the Atlantic, far away to the West. There had been a heavy storm earlier in the afternoon, but the Emperor, refusing the carriage which Savary had found for him at Mondragone, had ridden all that day hunched in the saddle, his hat pressed firmly down and his face sunk beneath the collar of his grey overcoat. For over an hour he had said not a word, except to order two troopers of his escort, whose mounts were slower than the rest, to fall behind and follow as best they could. He was riding to schedule and, changing horses every ten miles, would be in Vittoria by ten o'clock.

De Ségur, with an effort, recovered full conscious-

ness and became aware of the hypnotic rhythm of the escort behind him. He tried to regain the thrill of the one vivid moment of the day before when, on the road to Tolosa, the Emperor, at the head of the pass, had reined in his horse and looked down on a new land. Neither de Ségur nor Savary, who had met them at the frontier, had any clue to their master's present mood. The Emperor had greeted Savary with the briefest of nods and had asked for no news out of Spain. Of that he had presumably had enough at Bayonne, and none of it was good. Merciless war in a sullen land had reduced the soldiers of the Grand Army to the level of the savages on whom they preyed. That they were short of everything, even arms and ammunition, was a trifle and would be remedied. Shoes, clothing and munitions were coming up in plenty. More disquieting was the shameful collapse of discipline. Pillage and rape were reported from all sides.

Suddenly de Ségur was wide awake. The Emperor, half turning in the saddle, was beckoning him forward. He touched his horse and drew level. The Emperor pointed with his riding-whip.

'What is that?' he asked.

They were clear of the foothills and approaching the plain. De Ségur looked due west across the sodden earth to a group of poplars.

'I see nothing, Your Majesty.'

Napoleon jerked his wrist irritably and de Ségur, screwing up his eyes, perceived, away to the right, a trail of smoke. Two hundred yards distant a farmhouse was on fire and, as he watched, flames shot from the eaves and a beam fell with a crash that could be heard above the beating of the hooves on the road.

'See what it is,' said the Emperor.

De Ségur turned his horse and beckoned to the

troopers of the escort. They wheeled off the road. As they did so, the voice of the Emperor rang out.

'Wait,' he commanded. 'I am coming with you.'

The escort held back for the Emperor to pass. A shower of bright drops splashed upward from a puddle in which his horse had stumbled. The Emperor, with de Ségur and Savary, rode forward at his favourite pace, a slow canter, over the heavy ground. Soon they were near enough to hear the roaring of the flames and smell the burning wood.

Napoleon, rounding a corner of the flaming house, halted his horse so abruptly that de Ségur had to swerve violently to avoid running into him. He pulled up beside the Emperor, staring over his horse's head. Somewhere a man screamed suddenly. Then came a moment of silence, followed by a persistent shrieking in another tone and a clamour of oaths.

They were looking into an irregular courtyard. In the midst of it was a steaming midden and beside it a farm-cart, its shafts pointing to the sky. Pinned to the cart, one naked foot pressed into the liquid manure, the other drawn up towards his stomach, stood a man. His chin was tilted like the shafts of the cart. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth and his hands were clasped above the handle of a bayonet protruding below the breastbone. Beside this figure lay a barrel which had evidently fallen from the cart, and on the ground, stained red by the wine which poured from it, lay a tattered figure clad in the blue coat with red facings of the infantry of the line. The soldier's feet were bare and one leg carried a long gaiter lacking most of its buttons. The eyes of the man were open as he lapped the wine. Across the barrel lay a woman. Her black hair was loose and a

huge man was above her, yelling louder than she.

There was a sound of ripping cloth. The soldier had torn the bodice, which had once been white, and exposed the woman's right breast. She shrieked again, a mechanical sound, as the man groped and tussled. Beyond the doorstep of the farm lay a black figure, an old man, quite still, with thin grey hair. Two men, so ragged that only the torn red epaulettes on the left shoulder of the nearest showed that he was a French soldier, came staggering from the burning house. One of them stumbled over the prone figure, falling into the mud.

The Emperor sat motionless.

'Shoot those men,' he said suddenly, and turned his horse.

§ 2

Rifleman Harris shook the water from his shako and stared over the shoulder of the man in front of him. He had been told that the country would change. They had passed from Portugal into Spain, but those were the same old mountains in front through which they had been marching steadily for the last ten days and there seemed to be no reason why the rain should ever stop. He had thought he knew something about rain. But English rain fell with a promise of blue sky and green pastures. Here it fell as though God had no thought for man or beast and the sun would never shine again.

Parson had lied. The King had need of fools to fight for him, and old Admiral Brine, with young Mr. Henry, his son and heir, had backed up Parson in his tales. Portugal, if Parson was to be believed, was a fine country, full of sunshine and old churches fading yellow in the sunlight, oranges and fig trees; young

Mr. Henry had capped Parson with stories of black-eyed wenches smiling down on the lads who had come to save them from the French, and the Admiral had lamented his seventy-odd years and wished he had been young enough to be putting to sea as of old with the White Squadron.

Rifleman Harris had a vision of old Admiral Brine, Squire of Blandford, stumping along in this awful rain with his rheumatic hands clutching his sticks. Suddenly he laughed.

'Larfin', grunted a cockney voice at his side. 'Wot you larfin' at? I don't see nuffin to make us larf.'

Sunshine . . . oranges. Rifleman Harris stared hopelessly into the thin, cold rain that beat upon his face. Portugal had been a poor country and, as for Lisbon, which he understood was its capital, the place had stunk worse than a midden. In Portugal he had longed for Spain; but Spain, if this were Spain, seemed likely to be just as bad.

Nothing was as he had expected to find it. For instance, he was marching to fight the French, but nobody had seen a Frenchman yet. Nobody seemed to know anything, except that they were marching and were likely to go on marching. His boots, at this rate, would not last another ten days and he knew all about boots, being a cobbler; which meant, of course, that he'd have a lot of mending to do for the company, more work in the evening after the day's march, when a man was tired.

In Portugal there had been trees and bullock carts with the rations, but in Spain there was nothing but bare rocks and mud, a dreadful country, where the people seemed to live in holes in the ground. They were the colour of mud themselves and all the towns had heathen names: Elvas, El-Cantara, Castello Branco.

But the folk in the towns were better than the folk in the country. Only yesterday, for example, the people in one of those places with the tongue-twisting names had rolled great barrels of spirits, sweet-tasting, not so strong as rum, into the streets when the regiment had come in, cold and frozen. He could do now with a good dram of the stuff. What with the rain and the marching and the load he carried. For, besides his knapsack, filled to bursting, there was his greatcoat lying on top of it and on top of that his blanket and camp kettle. And if that wasn't enough, there was his haversack full of leather and a hammer to mend the boots, not to mention three days' rations of salt beef and biscuit and a hatchet and the bullets in his pouch which weighed, it seemed to him, heavier than the lead of which they were made. All this was enough to sink into the earth a little fellow of five-foot seven.

Words of command began to pass down the marching column. Blessed words that never came too soon: 'Halt, fall out!'

This meant ten minutes rest before they started again.

Rifleman Harris stepped thankfully to the side of the road. He was lucky enough to find a small pile of wet stones in which he scooped himself a seat, holding his firelock between his knees and letting the bottom of his knapsack rest on the topmost stone to ease the weight. He was now on the summit of a little rise. In front of him the road, or mud track, began to wind slowly downward. As he sat there, shivering a little in his sodden coat, his eyes turned to the East. The murk of the driving rain blew away for an instant, so that he had a view of the country in front of them. Somewhere ahead were the French and Boney himself, who, they said, had eaten babies in Egypt when he couldn't get butchers' meat. But

you couldn't believe everything you heard, nor half of it. And where was Egypt, anyway?

Rifleman Harris stared, across the hills, at an enormous expanse of rolling country, fading at its further rim into a drab sky. Up and down went the road, as it had gone ever since the beginning of the march. He tried to count the number of ridges that lay between him and a vague blur which, even as he looked at it, took shape as a town blinking under a distant ray of sunshine: a town at last and the sun shining on it, though, where he was sitting, it was raining still; a town with a great hump like an elephant rising out of it.

That must be the church, of course. All these Portuguese and Spanish towns had churches; fair swarming with them, they were. Not his idea of what a church should be, but whacking great palaces which smelt funny and were full of things that gave you the shivers: huge altars carved and twisted into fearful shapes, statues of saints, male and female, with naked hearts on their chests, pierced with swords, or starveling men pointing to wounds in their breasts and hands from which painted blood streamed down, idols and priests who mumbled and scratched themselves, with eyes as sharp as ferrets. He'd tell Parson about all this when he got back to Blandford.

But young Mr. Stanhope was passing and had stopped, as he always did, to say a good word. Young Mr. Stanhope looked after his men, not like Captain Cobham.

'Well, Harris,' came a cheerful voice, 'how are things with you?'

'Not so bad, sir,' said Harris, making a move to get up which was instantly checked by a gesture from the subaltern.

Harris sank back on his pile of stones.

'Better at home, sir,' he added, 'though I'm not one to grumble.'

Mr. Stanhope nodded, his fresh young face gleaming with raindrops.

'Things will be better here soon,' he said, pointing toward the town. 'That's Salamanca yonder, and we shall be sleeping there tonight and several nights to come, till the whole army gets together and we are ready for the French.'

His last words were drowned by the sound of a bugle blowing the fall-in. Rifleman Harris got stiffly to his feet, but his heart was lighter. Next day there would be no more marching and there might be something in that town dry and warm in the matter of billets.

Mr. Stanhope's words were passing from lip to lip, putting heart into the men as they formed up. Even Johnson, the cockney, was grinning.

The Colonel passed on his jaded horse.

'Quick march!'

Rifleman Harris stepped out and, as he did so, the drums and fifes of the regiment started up.

Soon, with the rest of the men, Rifleman Harris was singing.

§ 3

De Ségur pressed his horse. It had stopped raining and the mud had thickened. To make speed on these heavy roads was difficult, but his orders were precise. At all costs he must contrive to be in Burgos twelve hours in advance of the Emperor. The news of its taking had reached headquarters the night before, and he had left the Emperor dictating his bulletin, which stated that he had won the town with the loss of fifteen

killed and fifty wounded. The Emperor's bulletins became increasingly fanciful. Soult had confessed to losing at least two hundred men and that was probably an understatement.

De Ségur's instructions were to arrange billets for the staff and to impress upon officers of all ranks that the occupying troops were to be kept in hand. Not that the Emperor had any illusions left on the point of discipline. None knew better than he that hell would be let loose in the town and that no orders would avail to save it.

De Ségur, turning a corner, came suddenly upon a long line of country carts sprawling across the road so that he had to check his horse and take to the field. The field was full of stones and he was so fully occupied with his horse, which must not founder, that he was only vaguely aware of the burdens carried beside him, but, as he cantered past the line, he heard, above the creaking of the axle-trees, an unceasing murmur. For the carts were piled high with sick and wounded, four to six in a cart, lying as best they could. Here and there a face looked sidelong, white or yellow with dried mud. The carts moved with extreme slowness, for they were harnessed to bullocks. De Ségur's horse stumbled against a peasant who was leading one of the carts. The man looked at him sullenly as he slopped along in his big wooden sabots and dirty sheepskin coat, over which a brown hooded cloak had been thrown.

'Christ,' breathed a voice almost in de Ségur's ear as he was forced to rein up beside one of the carts. 'Take him off my leg. He's been dead an hour.'

De Ségur had a swift impression of a pile of dirty white-and-blue uniforms, a livid face with its mouth open, retching over the edge of the cart, and a body that hung head downwards swinging with every movement.

The peasant gave a sudden cry and thrust an iron-pointed stick into the buttock of the nearside bullock. The animal moved ponderously sideways. At last de Ségur was free and could urge his horse to better speed.

Mostly sick, he said to himself, unless Soult had been lying worse than usual. Again he pressed forward. At last there was sunshine, uncertain as yet, but growing steadily stronger, till the raindrops on his horses's flanks turned to steam which rose in a light vapour about him. The road twisted from the mountains into the plain and shortly he could see before him the vague outline of a considerable town. For a moment he reined in his horse and stood staring ahead. Those, he confirmed, were the walls of Burgos, crumbling but, seen from this distance, still massive and resistant. The ground in front of them was broken and the shadows in the gullies, for the sun was now shining in good earnest, presented a landscape alternate black and yellow.

The road plunged into a small defile and he lost his view of the city. Soon the gully broadened out and he found himself at the entrance of a village. The houses were of mud and roofed with broken tiles for the most part. His horse shied violently as he entered the narrow street. A corpse, clad in a sheepskin, was lying in the road. De Ségur leaning forward, patted and stroked his horse's neck, pulling it into a walk. This must be Gamonal. Just beyond it Soult had beaten Belvedere the day before. The doors and windows of the houses were shuttered and the village appeared at first to be entirely deserted, till in a house larger than the rest, built of stone, belonging perhaps to a merchant, de Ségur could perceive, through windows barred with iron, faces, white and staring, lifeless

except for the black eyes which followed him as he moved past.

Strange people, these Spaniards, he thought, and once again the doubt recurred. Would they ever submit? The Emperor was bringing them liberty, decent government, civilisation, but no one would have thought it from their faces. They said nothing. Apparently they wanted nothing but to be left alone, and, though you might beat them in the open field, you could not change their hearts. They were of different stuff from the laughing Austrians, with whom you could fraternise next day after a battle which had destroyed their army. These Spaniards were fierce, proud and had no discipline, united in nothing but their hatred of the French. Incredible tales were current at headquarters of the bitter quarrelling of the *juntas*. Nothing happened in this hag-ridden land as elsewhere.

De Ségur shivered and looked warily about him. He was riding alone in a country where no man dared to be taken alive, and the little wood he was approaching was a place in which it was easy to call to mind tales of French prisoners waylaid and hacked to pieces, thrown into cauldrons of boiling water, sawn between planks or roasted over a slow fire.

Things like that did not happen in Germany or Austria or Italy; but they happened in Spain.

The trees closed in upon him as he advanced and then opened again to a small clearing, and his eye was caught in passing by something that stirred beside a sapling ten yards away to the right. He reined in his horse and drew his pistol. A gleam of sunlight striking through the trees picked out the torn jacket of a soldier dark against the silver bole.

De Ségur stared and sickened as the shape took form and substance. Above the jacket lolled the head

of a man, hideously mutilated, tied by the neck to the silver tree, and, even as de Ségur gazed, the head came up and the eyes moved. De Ségur advanced to within a few paces. By the uniform this should be a Spanish general. For a moment the dark eyes looked into those of De Ségur thanking him as he raised the pistol and fired.

The horse started violently and, de Ségur, in a cold sweat, reloading as he went, gave the animal its head, till he was clear of the wood. If the Spaniards handled a man of their own race like that, what would they do to him?

He clattered through another small village, the mud flying to right and left. There was a strange smell in the air. First he thought it came from the dead, but here there were no dead that he could see. The battle had not been fought in the village, but in the open country beyond it, and bodies did not smell so soon. No, it was just the usual smell, the odour of Spanish life.

He crossed some wide meadows, with a river to his left and another wood bisected by the road in front of him. Keeping a firm grip upon his nerves, he cantered steadily through the wood, though it seemed as dark as the place of horror from which he had ridden ten minutes before. No bird sang in it, nor was there any movement. The trees stood rigid as though part of a painted scene. It seemed an eternity till he was clear of the trees and obtained a view of more rolling country, with Burgos perhaps three miles ahead.

But this, at last, was the battlefield. All across the plain were little heaps and bundles, colourless after twenty-four hours of rain. They lay particularly thick on either side of the road and, as he rode past, he noted that they had nearly all died by the sabre. Lasalle's Light Cavalry Division and Milhaud's Dragoons had

found it easy work, he thought, riding down the guns and the Galician infantry. These Spaniards were no good in the open field. They needed stone walls for their defence. Among the dead he noticed several figures dressed in the brown or black of monks, priests who had come out to battle with their flock.

The drawn howl of a dog came to his ears. He turned his head. It was a sporting dog, somewhat larger than a spaniel, with silken hair. He was crouching beside a dead man and his muzzle was lifted to the grey sky. De Ségur had half a mind to call the dog to himself, but checked the impulse. Other dogs, he noted, were wandering over the plain or else lay silent, dead beside their masters, and, as he urged his tired horse into a brisker canter towards Burgos, now to be seen, plain and clear, before him, his last impression of the battlefield was of dead men mourned by the dogs that crouched beside them.

§ 4

‘Keep to the ranks, there, keep to the ranks!’

The Corporal ran forward shouting. These bastards from Normandy were a disgrace to the Grand Army, and Gaspard was one of the worst. Mealy-mouthed, ruminating like the cows they looked after in their native pastures, yet cunning, with the low cunning of a beast that can think only of himself and has no herd sense. It looked as though he would not be able to keep the men together much longer. They were near to mutiny, not because they had come too late for the battle—much they cared who did the fighting—but because the troops who had beaten the Spaniards had reached Burgos twenty-four hours ahead of them and must by now have had most of the pickings.

They had just emerged from a ruined gateway in a ruined wall and were now traversing a long street, unexpectedly broad and bordered with houses, deserted except for the pillagers. Most of the houses were scarred and gutted. The dead lay everywhere, for Milhaud's dragoons had ridden right through the town, and the corpses lay about, in any sort of order, among the reeking filth of the street. Most of them were stripped to the skin, though why anybody should rob a Spanish soldier passed all comprehension, for he usually wore nothing but a ragged coat and a still more ragged cloak with a hood to it.

Corporal Dominique Fleuret wrinkled his nose and looked about him. The regiment was to be billeted in the Seminario beside the cathedral, and the Emperor himself would be next door in the Archbishop's Palace; but, with men falling out at every step to join their drunken comrades in the work of pillage, there would be precious little left of it by the time it reached its quarters. It was raining and the November afternoon was drawing to its close. Burgos, however, was as bright as at noonday by reason of the flames, roaring in half a dozen places from the roofs and upper windows of the houses. Corporal Fleuret jerked his head as a loud crash came from the left. The door of a house had fallen outwards and two French dragoons emerged, both very drunk. One carried in his arms, as it might be a baby, two gilt candelabra, an inlaid box of which the clasp was broken, half a dozen silver plates, one of which slipped and fell to the ground, making no sound as it struck the filth in the gutter, and, topping all, a small golden reliquary, set with jewels and containing a tiny fragment of human bone lying on a cushion of crimson plush. The second trooper was bowed beneath a pillow-case dripping with silver coins.

‘Plenty more where this came from,’ he shouted at the marching men.

He staggered a pace forward when one of his long spurs caught in a piece of skirt covering the body of a woman lying on the greasy stones. He tripped and fell sprawling, so that the pillow-case burst and the coins were scattered far and wide over the dung.

‘Keep to the ranks there,’ shouted the Corporal, but he might as well have howled to the moon. The scattered coins were too much for what remained of the discipline of the Fifty-fifth and in a moment they scattered, pushing their way with shouts and cries into the narrow lanes between the houses.

Something struck him on the left shoulder, a chamber-pot flung from an upper window. The face of the man who had thrown it, split from ear to ear in a drunken grin, gazed down at him a moment and then disappeared like a jack-in-the-box.

Corporal Fleuret found himself with less than a dozen men. They were his oldest soldiers of course, Henri, Pierre, Jean, Guillaume and the rest.

‘Come on, lads,’ he said. ‘We will round up those bastards later.’

They marched on till the street took a turn to the right and they found themselves in a small square opposite a huge church, covered with saints and pinnacles. The square was choked with transport. Horses were standing, with drooping heads, attached to abandoned ammunition waggons; bullocks were lying in the muck with the single shaft of the cart to which they were harnessed harrowing their long backs. The noise in the square was deafening. Men of all arms were staggering to and fro. Corporal Fleuret noticed a little light-cavalry man who straddled a stone

lion beside a fountain. He was crouching low as though in the saddle, yelling monotonously: 'Charge! Charge!' and waving above his head a bulbous straw-covered bottle with a long thin neck.

In the space in front of the church a mixed crowd of soldiers came towards him. One man had thrust his head through the hole in a chasuble sewn with pearls and embroidered with saints whose heads were outlined against golden aureoles. The solemn needle-worked faces stared from the back of the drunken soldier, the hand of one of them, a bishop or cardinal, raised in benediction.

Fleuret marched steadily on with his faithful remnant. Langres, who had been sent ahead to find their billets, appeared suddenly at the corner of the square. He, at any rate, thank God, was sober, and Fleuret congratulated himself on having chosen a man who had got a dose, and therefore could not drink wine, to lead them to their billets.

They climbed a broad lane, with a wide step six inches high in the roadway every five yards, greasy beneath their feet.

'That's the Seminario, Corporal,' said Langres hoarsely. 'Just round the corner there on the left.'

He pointed to a blackened archway whose great doors had been battered down, so that one of them lay pressed into the mud half across the entrance and the other swung crookedly from a single hinge.

'Left wheel,' shouted Fleuret, and doubled up past the thin ranks of his squad to lead them into their billet, for he had been marching in the rear up till now.

'What's a Seminario?' he demanded of Langres as they turned in at the gateway.

'Place where they teach you to be a bleeding monk,' responded Langres.

‘But they’ve got wine in the cellars,’ he added hopefully.

They crossed a courtyard, clean in the sense that there was nothing but water puddling the stones. One side of it was blocked by the west front of a chapel, and Fleuret caught sight of a top-heavy portico on which crouched two bulbous stone angels. A row of thin saints, clutching the instruments of their martyrdom, broke the straight line of the roof against the sky.

‘In the chapel,’ said Langres. ‘It’s warm and dry and smells better than most places. Everywhere else is packed. Half the Forty-seventh are in the refectory and the Eighty-sixth are all over the place. They’ve put the Swiss in the stables.’

Fleuret nodded without speaking and followed Langres as he pushed open a small side-door, for the main doors of the chapel were locked. It was not large, like the great cathedral church just below them, and the nave in the half light appeared to be half full of men of the Forty-seventh sprawling on the floor.

‘That end,’ said Langres, pointing towards the choir, ‘where you see the straw. It’s not so bad.’

Corporal Fleuret turned and beckoned his men one by one through the door. Then he noticed that the church was nearly empty, the shapes he had taken for men of the Forty-seventh being only their knapsacks and other equipment, which had been flung down and left there while their owners went off to plunder.

Fleuret surveyed his men as they began to loosen their knapsacks and to spread the straw, when he was astonished to observe a long line of dark figures entering one by one from a door at the eastern end of the choir, not far from the High Altar, which had already been stripped of most of its ornaments and on which

there burned two candles in brass candlesticks.

'Monks,' said Langres in his ear.

One by one the dark figures bobbed before the Cross upon the Altar and slipped into their stalls to right and left. They were, he noticed, mostly old men. A tall figure in a black hood was moving towards him. So thin was the face protruding above the cowl that the man looked like a walking skeleton.

He approached Fleuret, bowed and said something in Spanish, pointing to the men who were busy with the straw. Fleuret could not understand what he said, but the monk held a large key in his hand, which he extended with the smile of a man seeking to ingratiate himself at all costs with the enemy.

'Take it, Corporal,' shouted one of the men. 'We could do with a drop of something. Yes, by God, we could. Take his key from him.'

'Wait a moment, lads. You shall have all you want in a minute.'

The monk spoke again, this time in broken French. Fleuret found that he could recognise a word here or there, but the monk had to repeat himself more than once before he really understood. He burst into a loud laugh.

'What do you make of it?' he asked, turning to Langres.

'He wants us to sing for our supper, as far as I can make out,' answered Langres.

The monk pushed his key under their noses.

'I give you,' he said very slowly, 'double quantity if you sing. Very good wine.'

Fleuret nodded, feeling ill at ease standing there in his wet boots before the barefooted monk.

'Stop that spitting, André,' he yelled suddenly to one of the men sprawling on the straw a foot away.

'Sing,' repeated the monk. 'Sing for the glory of Almighty God.'

Fleuret turned to his men. Not a bad idea, he was thinking. If he could get his men to sing, they would be less likely to go plundering.

'This bastard wants us to sing,' he said with a laugh. 'What do you say, boys?'

André got to his feet.

'It's all one to me, Corporal,' he said. 'But let him give us the wine.'

The tall monk nodded vigorously.

'Very good wine,' he repeated.

The monk made a gesture towards the door from which he had come and, suddenly, Dominique Fleuret divined why he had made this strange request. These monks were afraid, not for themselves, for they had already chosen death in life, but for the men he commanded, for their souls. Half forgotten words from the old Abbé St. Pierre away back in Barthelévillle, and later on at Gondrécourt, where he had gone to school, came to his mind.

'Come on, lads, let him have what he wants,' he shouted suddenly. 'Squad, 'shun.'

The men came to attention.

'To the choir, quick march!'

The men stepped out, their boots slipping on the marble floor. They filed to right and left and stood, each man beside one of the robed figures.

'Corporal,' spoke up André with a broad grin. 'What's the number of this bloody psalm?'

'You never learned any psalms,' retorted Fleuret, 'but it's all one to them what we sing. They won't understand a word of it.'

The men looked at each other. Then Dominique Fleuret broke the silence.

'Do, mi, so, fa, mi, ré, do,' he intoned, and the men after a moment's hesitation took up the tune. It was the simplest singing exercise that he had learned as a boy at Gondrecourt. They sang it lustily, and by the time they had come to an end their blood was warm.

Then André burst joyfully into the nursery rhyme: '*Pelle en haut, pelle en bas, pelle avec son beau petit manche...*'

Two monks had meanwhile appeared through the door bearing panniers loaded with bottles. The bottles passed along the two rows of men, who drank eagerly. Fleuret, seeing that the monks were pleased with their singing, urged them to further efforts.

'*On va leur percer le flanc,*' he roared.

The song took him back to Austerlitz, when it had been all the rage, and, when they had finished that one, it was Langres who started 'Frère Jacques.' The men took it up in canon and rolled it to and fro till the chapel rocked.

Then came a pause. Song and wine had done their work, so that André, who was now a little drunk, burst into the song of 'The Jolly Miller.' It was not the sort of song to sing in a church, for the Jolly Miller's adventures in the field of love were many and circumstantial. But the men, thoroughly warm now, were not to be denied, though this, Dominique reflected, was the oddest praise the good God had ever received in that place. They were in the middle of the seventh stanza when the door at the end of the nave burst suddenly open.

'What's all this noise? Who is in charge here?'

It was the voice of authority. Fleuret turned and moved swiftly down the aisle. A man in a major's uniform was standing by the door and, with him, an aide-de-camp holding a torch which flickered upon

the major's dark-blue uniform and picked out the gilt on his cuffs and shoulders.

'Corporal Fleuret of the Fifty-fifth, sir,' said Dominique, clicking his heels.

The Major strode forward.

'Collect your men, Corporal,' he commanded.

'Fatigue party. The Emperor's billet is on fire.'

§ 5

'No, sir, I can last it out. But the candles are finished.'

De Ségur, as he entered the long room, recognised the voice of Duroc, at work behind the screen.

Next came the voice of the Emperor himself.

'More light, Roustan.'

De Ségur began to walk down the room, once the refectory of the Archbishop's Palace, but serving now as the Emperor's workroom. By the time he had reached the screen Roustan was taking fresh candles from a leather box on the table. On seeing de Ségur, Duroc rose to take the candles and his shadow ran over the plastered walls.

'Quick,' said the Emperor. 'I have still a great deal to do.'

'Let me take a turn, sir,' said de Ségur.

The Emperor nodded impatiently and Duroc smiled his relief. Napoleon was standing with his back to the fire. He had been in the saddle most of the day, but had changed his clothes after supper and his white breeches and green coat were for once dry and untarnished. There was a spot of colour on his cheek bones. His hands were clasped in the small of his back, and his right foot tapped impatiently as Roustan, having lit the candles, withdrew to the bedroom beyond.

De Ségur slipped into the chair and picked up the pen.

‘Concerning the Fort of Burgos’ [dictated the Emperor] ‘it can be attacked only from the heights on the north-west. Two batteries must be placed to cover the threatened position, one of eight pieces on the rampart at its present height, the other in one of the towers, which must be reconstructed to carry two light pieces.’

De Ségur’s hand flew over the sheet. Where was Méneval? This was his work.

‘Now about my carriage,’ the Emperor continued.

De Ségur took up a new sheet.

‘Those devils nearly got hold of it yesterday.’

The Emperor’s voice was petulant. De Ségur lifted his head.

‘Really, sir.’

‘Yesterday morning,’ said the Emperor. ‘Take this down.’

De Ségur bent over the table.

‘The Colonel of the foot grenadiers of my Guard is charged with the duty of guarding my travelling carriage. An officer and three men are to be constantly on duty for that purpose. The carriage contains State papers and is never to be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy. Should it be likely to do so, the Colonel is to burn the carriage with all its contents and to make certain that nothing escapes the flames.’

There was a moment’s silence. De Ségur thrust the sheet into a wicker basket at his side.

‘Now a letter to Champagny.’

The Emperor’s voice rose to a sharper pitch.

‘You will find enclosed a draft note in reply to the communication received from Mr. Canning. Take two or three days to consult M. de Roumanzoff on the matter. You will then despatch the note by an intelligent man with instructions

to spread it about that Spain is mastered, that eighty thousand Spanish rebels have already been destroyed and that great numbers are arriving daily as prisoners in France.'

The Emperor paused. De Ségur furtively massaged his right hand.

'Tired, de Ségur?'

'No, sir.'

De Ségur thrust his pen into the ink.

'The note is to be signed by Champagny himself. Note begins: The undersigned has brought the attention of the Emperor, his master, to Mr. Canning's communication. If it be true that the war brings no real inconvenience to England, the undersigned sees little prospect of achieving peace. The two Emperors, meeting at Erfurt, hoped that Mr. Canning would not misunderstand the object of their negotiations. The English Government nevertheless seems to attribute the agreement reached on that occasion to weakness and the pressure of events. A true statesman would read it as evidence of magnanimity and an expression of power. France and Russia are resolved to carry on the war as long as England fails to return to just and proper sentiments. Any proposal to include the Spanish rebels in the negotiations can only be considered by the French Government as an insult.'

De Ségur wrote on steadily, but cramp was imminent.

'Peace, to be permanent, must be honourable and equal between all the Powers concluding it.'

'Your Majesty!'

De Ségur looked up from his notes. An aide-de-camp, trembling in his impatience, had come round the edge of the screen. He stood waiting.

'What is it?' said the Emperor sharply. 'I am not to be interrupted.'

'Sorry, Your Majesty,' the aide-de-camp stammered, 'but the p-palace is on fire.'

De Ségur smiled involuntarily, but the smile vanished as there came to his ears through the shutters,

barred against the clamour in the streets below, muted cries and a fierce crackling of flames.

‘Put it out!’ snapped the Emperor. ‘If you need more men, go to the Seminario and bring up a platoon of the Fifty-fifth.’

The aide-de-camp saluted and vanished behind the screen. The Emperor turned back to de Ségur.

‘A note for Cambacérès,’ he continued.

De Ségur waited.

‘Express my extreme discontent to Monsieur Beugnot for having signed a contract with Monsieur Agar without any order from me and without having power to do so. I have no intention of paying for the furniture which the King of the two Sicilies left at Düsseldorf, and Monsieur Beugnot must see to it that not a penny goes to Naples. Make it clear to him, however, that he is not to upset the Grand Duke. I have no wish to go to extremes, but these persons must be more careful of my interests.’

There was a slight pause. De Ségur scribbled fast. Burgos was in flames and the troops were entirely out of hand. Yet Monsieur Beugnot must see to it that not a penny went to Naples.

‘Now a note to Fouché. Tell him to spread abroad in the Dutch, German and Paris newspapers articles on the Sicilian expedition. They are to contain completely wrong and alarmist information, but they must be skilfully written. Regard should be had to probability but not to truth.’

Napoleon cleared his throat and began again on a slightly higher note.

‘Now to my brother, the King of Spain:’

‘The provinces of Santander, Biscay and Soria are now subdued and awaiting your commands. To keep them thus, however, it is necessary for the intendants, corregidores and magistrates, whom the people are accustomed to obey, to be nominated

by you. They are to issue proclamations granting an amnesty to all rebels who surrender their arms.'

Again the Emperor paused. De Ségur smiled thankfully as a light hand fell on his shoulder and the face of Méneval gleamed in the candlelight. Silently he rose from the table as Méneval as silently slipped into the vacant chair.

The Emperor seemed hardly to have noticed the change.

'We pass to the orders of the day. The first is to Ney.'

'My cousin, you are to march from Aranda and thence to Soria and Tarazona in order to cut off Castafios, whom you will drive back to the Pyrenees. The Duke of Dalmatia is already at Reynosa, where I expect him to cut off the forces of Blake. If he should fail to do so, he will occupy the town of Santander, where it is known that British stores have been landed in great quantities. If you succeed in reaching Tarazona by the 24th, the fate of the Spanish army of the centre is sealed. You are then to proceed . . .'

De Ségur stifled a yawn. This would go on far into the night. Meanwhile some one had said that the palace was on fire.

He turned and walked quietly away down the long room.

§ 6

Talleyrand looked about him with satisfaction. Here was a world proof against time and change. It had survived the Revolution and it would survive the Empire. Of that, sitting in this quiet room in the Rue Roquépine, one could still be confident. He relaxed into his favourite chair and watched his old friend Madame de Laval and her middle-aged lover, Narbonne, bending his grizzled head with an easy

gallantry over the hand which dispensed small glasses of home-made liqueurs from a table in front of her. These were people with whom he could feel at home. They might, in clothes of a slightly different fashion, have been attending one of the drawing-rooms of his youth, when the King had ruled at Versailles. Choiseul-Gouffier was talking to Jaucourt, to La Marck, the friend of Mirabeau, and to the Comte de Clary, son-in-law of the Prince de Ligne.

He looked down again at the volume of Massillon lying open on his knees. How fine were the periods! The man was a master. He wrote with authority, Grand Chamberlain to the Court of Heaven.

‘Sermons, my dear Prince. You astonish me!’

Madame de la Tour-du-Pin, with Madame de Coigny, had sat down on the sofa at his side.

Talleyrand looked up from the book with a smile.

‘Massillon is kind to our faults. He even allows us to retain them, for he argues here that they are but the reverse of the coin. Turn it and you will discover corresponding virtues on the other side.’

Madame de Laval, from her decanters, smiled across the room.

‘I am bold enough to hope,’ she said, ‘that the pleasure you take in Massillon may one day lead you nearer to God.’

The sincerity with which she spoke checked his impulse to doubt whether a taste for good prose had ever sufficed to get a man to heaven, and threw him back upon a more gentle evasion.

‘All roads lead to Rome,’ he responded.

Narbonne smiled down on them from his post by the mantelpiece.

‘It would be a long road for some of us.’

‘Who knows? Some day we may take it together,

though you, my friend, are the last person I should expect to meet on the way. You have solved all your problems. You only need what lies to your hand, and I think you will be content to remain where you are to the end.'

Talleyrand broke off suddenly. A woman, dressed simply but in the height of fashion, had entered the room. He placed his hands on the side of his chair and rose stiffly to his feet, for his crippled leg had gone to sleep. But the gesture was almost a reflex.

God, he thought, how lovely she must have been in her youth to be still so beautiful.

The Duchess of Courland came forward to take his greeting. They met half-way and Talleyrand kissed the hand held out to him.

'Sit down over there,' she said, in a whisper so light that Talleyrand, if he had not been expecting it, would never have heard.

He limped across the room to a chair, set alone at a little distance from the wall. He wondered what she would say to him when she came.

He leaned back, observing that La Marck and Jaucourt were looking towards him and, at that same moment, there came a rustle of skirts behind the chair. A white forearm rested lightly beside his shoulder.

'I saw de Nesselrode this morning,' she said softly.

Talleyrand leaned back his head, but did not speak.

'Alexander Tchernychev,' continued the voice, 'is on his way from Petersburg. You may expect a message by him.'

Talleyrand inclined his head almost imperceptibly. All eyes in the room were upon him. Not that anyone suspected, or would have betrayed, him. But de Laval, Coigny, and de la Tour-du-Pin were all half dead

with jealousy because the Duchess of Courland stood behind his chair.

‘How is dear Dorothy?’ he asked.

‘The child is happy. She talks much of Edmond.’

Talleyrand smiled. That was good hearing. The marriage of his nephew was near his heart. Nearer still was the news which Dorothy’s mother had brought him. Tchernychev, the confidential aide-de-camp of the Czar, was on his way to Paris with a message.

He beckoned to La Marck.

‘What do they say in Paris?’ he asked, ‘of the Emperor’s campaign?’

La Marck looked at him in astonishment.

‘You should know that better than I,’ he said.

‘It is the general view,’ interposed Narbonne bluntly, ‘that the Emperor would have been wiser not to undertake this business.’

‘Or to undertake it differently,’ suggested Talleyrand. ‘We are in this case concerned less with what the Emperor has done than how he has chosen to do it. Crowns are won. They are not stolen.’

There was a slight indrawing of breath from La Marck at his side. Talleyrand continued serenely.

‘Nothing was easier for the Emperor than to overthrow the house of Bourbon and it may even be argued that such a step was necessary. But why did the Emperor use trickery and cunning? Thereby he has allowed himself to be entangled in the domestic politics of Spain. Had he declared open war upon the Bourbons six months ago the Spanish nation would have remained neutral. They might even have welcomed him as a deliverer if he had at the same time respected their national pride. They had no cause to defend King Charles and the Prince of the Peace. But the Emperor, by decoying Prince Ferdinand to French

soil and setting himself up as arbiter in a Spanish quarrel, has set the whole nation against him. He has identified the Bourbons with the Spanish cause. He has made even the Inquisition popular.'

The silence that followed was broken by Jaucourt.

'The Emperor's handling of affairs in Spain,' he said warmly, 'is a crime against international fair dealing.'

Talleyrand shrugged his shoulders.

'It is worse than a crime,' he said softly. 'It is a blunder. I cannot tell you what is going to happen, but a thing so badly begun cannot succeed.'

Out of the corner of his eye Talleyrand watched Narbonne edging towards the door. He repressed a smile with difficulty. This was treason and Narbonne was afraid. But it would be all over Paris in a day or two.

Just one more thrust before Narbonne was out of hearing.

'The Emperor,' he said in a clear voice, 'has entered upon an undertaking against the desires of a whole nation. He has reversed the policy which gave him Italy and which has kept him safe against the dynasties. He has declared himself to be an enemy of the peoples. That is a mistake and he will never be able to repair it.'

§ 7

'How many men did you lose last night, Savary?'

The Emperor turned his horse as he spoke and moved off down the uneven road. De Ségur did not hear Savary's reply, but only the Emperor's comment.

'What, sixty of my Guards? It is scandalous.'

Evidently his master's mood was still one of deep displeasure. But that seemed to be his permanent

condition. For a moment in Burgos, when he had been able to smooth his nerves with incessant work, his mood had lightened. But Burgos was now three days march behind him and his depression had returned.

Yet things were going well enough. Blake and Castaños were in flight, with Ney in pursuit; and now the Emperor, with the Old Guard, horse and foot, with the first corps under Victor and La Tour-Maubourg's cavalry, at least forty-five thousand men in all, was heading for Madrid. King Joseph, left behind in Burgos, was guarding his communications, and that was about all poor Joseph was fit for. The flanks of the army were safe. Ney and Moncey were on the left, Soult and Lefebvre on the right, and only the evening before despatches had come from Mortier to say that he and Junot with forty thousand more were threading the passes of the Pyrenees.

From the twenty-third to the twenty-eighth of November the Emperor had waited in the village of Aranda. That, presumably, was to allow Soult and Ney's flanking movements to develop. Never had the Emperor seemed so cautious. Nevertheless he still affected to despise the Spanish levies. The word bandit was rarely off his lips. They were all of them bandits: the prisoners who looked at you with eyes that burned with hatred as they were herded to the rear; the peasants seen here and there on the roadside; the soldiers who stood between them and the capital. Here, perhaps, was the source of his uneasiness. He felt safe enough in the presence of opposing armies. They played the game of which he was a master. But these bandits were incalculable. They conformed to no human pattern that he knew. Their fanaticism had infected even the soldiers of France with strange new lusts and cruelties which even his presence could not control.

De Ségur stared out over the sterile land towards the pass of Somosierra. The mountains rose on either side, but not very steeply. They were bare and rocky, their lower slopes covered with scrub of an indeterminate reddish-brown. Difficult country, he thought, but possible enough for infantry. The guns and cavalry must stay on the paved road on which they were now riding, which wound in a series of curves up the hillside. Upon his right hand, a few yards away, was a deep ravine confining a river. The troops had been on the move since dawn.

The Emperor wheeled his horse suddenly off the road. Obediently de Ségur followed him. Savary was on the other side. The Emperor's face was as solemn as the grey sky above their heads. The reins lay loose upon his horse's neck, so that Roustan, who followed immediately behind, dismounted and held it by the bridle. The Emperor with his glass was scanning the heights in front of them. The heavy air was full of noise, most of it made by the boots of the Guard beating a monotonous rhythm as they moved up the road in a winding column of blue and white.

'Guns,' said the Emperor. 'That is so, Savary?'

Savary, too, had a glass to his eye.

'Yes, sir,' he said, taking it down and shutting it with a snap. 'Guns in position on the top of the pass.'

The Emperor turned his head.

'Aide-de-camp, on duty,' he said.

The Emperor's aides, lined up on their horses, had stationed themselves to his right. The officer at the head of the line moved forward a pace or two and saluted stiffly.

'Instruct Marshal Victor to deploy General Ruffin's Division immediately,' said the Emperor, speaking in

the tone of cool precision which he invariably used in giving his battle orders.

The aide-de-camp saluted again, wheeled his horse and went off at a gallop. De Ségur watched him till a swirl of mist hid him from view.

The Emperor picked up his glass again. A thin rain had begun to fall. Filthy weather, thought de Ségur, and turned to the movements of the troops immediately in front of him, though he could not see very well, for the squadron of Polish Light Horse, acting that day as the Emperor's escort, obscured his view. De Ségur shifted his horse a little, till he could see more clearly the main column of the Guard, which now came to a halt at the foot of the pass, three hundred yards away.

Presently he began to discern on the rocky hill-side, to right and left of the pass, straggling uneven lines of little figures spreading out on either hand. He focused his glass on them and watched. Ruffin's men, of the Ninth Light Infantry, were moving slowly up on the right in skirmishing order, while on the left he could see the red-plumed shakos of another battalion of infantry scrambling among the rocks. That must be the Twenty-fourth of the line.

Then, as he watched, a shivering flame ran along the hillside and a moment later there came to his ears a sharp rattle of musketry. The thin flickers crept slowly up the mountain-side like the beginnings of a forest fire.

His attention was broken by Savary's voice beside him speaking to the Emperor.

'The Ninth will get them, sir,' said Savary, pointing to the west, 'and the mist is clearing. It will be over in a couple of hours.'

De Ségur sat waiting, but, contrary to Savary's prophecy, the mist came down again between the

Emperor and the troops in the battle-line. It was streaming towards them along the ground at the height of a man and presently he found himself suspended, as it were, unable to see his horse's legs. The Emperor still sat motionless. They could see nothing now, but through the mist came a faint crackle of musketry and soon afterwards the booming of guns.

The Emperor threw back his head, scattering the moisture from his hat brim on to the shoulders of his grey coat.

'Fourteen or sixteen guns,' he said, 'not more.'

As he spoke the mist rolled away again and de Ségur could see the head of the Ninety-sixth regiment of the line moving slowly up the winding road towards the top of the pass where the guns were flashing. The outflanking battalions to right and left were no longer visible.

'Forward,' said the Emperor.

He touched his horse and broke into a lumbering canter. De Ségur followed close behind. Savary was on the Emperor's right hand and on the left rode Berthier with the aides-de-camp on duty spread out a little distance behind them. They were on the road now and the mist was thinning.

'Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor!'

The cry which de Ségur had heard on so many battlefields broke from a line of men, plastered with mud, who were standing on one side with pickaxes and shovels in their hands. De Ségur recognised the engineers who had been sent forward under Bertrand to repair the road. Following the Emperor he crossed a small stone bridge. It was packed with troops. They pressed themselves against the side of the parapet, their bayonets bristling like the quills of a hedgehog,

and, as he rode past, de Ségur had a glimpse of a swift succession of moustached faces, topped by the bearskins of the Guard.

‘Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor!’

The little figure in the grey coat and black hat pressed forward, hunched in the saddle ten paces in front of him, but slowed to a walk as the road began to climb upwards. The crackle of musketry fire broke out again from the right and, at long last, the mist showed signs of disappearing altogether. Now they were in the defile and dripping rocks rose upon either side. The Emperor halted. There was much jingling of bits and stamping of hoofs as the Polish Light Horse, forming his escort, halted beside him.

‘Tell Senamont to bring his guns into action against the enemy batteries,’ the Emperor commanded.

There followed another wait, while the order was being executed, and de Ségur, imitating his master, turned his glass upon the crest. From his present position he could see the Spanish batteries which were firing at the Twenty-fourth and Ninety-sixth scarcely five hundred yards away. They had, he noted, an excellent field of fire, being posted not on the edge of the crest, but some distance behind it. He could not make out the guns very clearly, for they were shrouded in the smoke of their own frequent discharges, but they seemed to stretch right across the neck of the pass.

‘The guns are well posted,’ came Savary’s voice in his ear, ‘but the fools have no infantry on the side slopes. We shall outflank them. It’s only a matter of time. Ah, there come our guns!’

A battery of artillery was lumbering past.

‘Action left!’ shouted the gunner officer in com-

mand as the battery began to deploy.

De Ségur watched the gunners as they brought their pieces into action. The Emperor, he noticed, was watching too, and, at the first discharge, he rode impetuously forward.

‘Not grape at this range, round shot,’ he shouted.

The Emperor urged forward his horse till he stood right over the officer commanding the battery. His face was flushed. De Ségur plunged after him, in time to see the gunner officer salute and give an order. There was a second discharge and the air in a moment was full of acrid smoke. Emperor and staff coughed in the murk of it and Berthier’s round face was crimson.

The guns fired a third time.

‘No good!’ the Emperor’s voice sounded sharp and clear in the sudden silence after the discharge. ‘You can only bring a couple of pieces to bear. No good at all.’

He looked round him. At the same instant the last shred of fog disappeared and the sun shone down from a clearing sky. Instinctively de Ségur interposed his horse between the Emperor and the enemy fire.

For a moment they waited in silence. The Emperor was staring towards the guns on the pass. His hands were twitching on the reins. He had the air of a man crossed and overwrought. Clearly he was much put out that his guns should be useless. De Ségur watched him uneasily. There was no good cause for this impatience. The infantry must be almost ready to take the enemy batteries in flank. Over the pass lay Madrid, and the delay of half an hour could make no difference one way or the other.

Suddenly the Emperor turned and faced his escort.

‘Montbrun,’ he called, ‘take the escort and clear the head of the pass.’

De Ségur could not believe his ears, but his eyes did not deceive him. For there was Montbrun, saluting. He had accepted the order as though it were the most natural thing in the world; yet the escort did not number a hundred men and it had four hundred yards of open ground to cover before it reached the Spanish guns. De Ségur fumbled for his glass. Montbrun was shouting.

‘Polish Light Horse. By the right. Dress!’

The bits jingled as the men, moving at the word of command, drew up in two lines, quick and steady as on parade. Montbrun put himself at their head. Did he realise what the order meant? What could it be but a senseless gesture? Had it been necessary to clear the pass at all costs by direct attack, the order would at least have been comprehensible. But de Ségur, watching the Spanish battery through his glass, saw already that the gunners were beginning to look uneasily over their shoulders. There was no doubt they were growing nervous. Ruffin’s battalions were clearing the heights on either side and, once the crests above them were in French hands, their position would be untenable. Why did the Emperor refuse to wait?

‘Draw sabres.’

There was a rattle and hiss of steel. The sword flashes were reflected, bright against the dark rock of the defile. Montbrun was standing in his stirrups. He had his sabre in his right hand and in his left his hat with the general’s plumes.

‘Polish Light Horse. Forward, march!’

The squadron moved slowly for the first ten yards. Then on the command, ‘Trot,’ they quickened their

pace, and on the command, 'Charge,' went forward at the gallop.

'Aide-de-camp, on duty.'

It was the Emperor calling.

'Tell General Walther to bring up the Chasseurs of the Guard.'

De Ségur looked over his left shoulder to where, at the end of the defile, waited an ordered mass of horses and green-clad men. The Chasseurs were a thousand strong. If they moved up in support. . . . But why was it necessary? The heights would be won at any moment. The Spanish guns were speaking fast. Montbrun had covered the first hundred yards, but at least a dozen of the hundred saddles were empty.

'Blood of Christ! What are they doing?'

De Ségur stiffened as he heard the Emperor's oath. Napoleon was staring over his horse's head. What they were doing was clear enough. One hundred yards away, where a moment before had been a squadron charging in line, a number of men and horses were huddling in a dip of the ground where the rocks gave them cover from the guns. A dozen or more riderless horses were galloping madly about. Little bundles lay still or twitching on the mountain grass. Montbrun could be seen waving his sword, but his troopers would not leave their cover and a rider was coming back towards the Emperor. It was Colonel Piré, acting that day as aide-de-camp to Montbrun. He reined in his horse and saluted.

'General Montbrun respectfully informs Your Majesty that the task is not possible in view of the position of the Spanish guns.'

Before the Emperor could reply, General Walther, commanding the cavalry of the Guard, intervened.

‘ May I venture to suggest, sir, that you wait until Ruffin has got his men to the heights,’ and he pointed to the rocks above them.

‘ Wait? ’

The Emperor’s voice was shrill. He slewed round and his face was dark with ungovernable rage. In his hand was a light riding whip, and he aimed at Colonel Piré a violent blow. Had not the Colonel jerked back his head, the whip would have struck him across the face.

‘ Is my Guard to be stopped by these bandits? ’

De Ségur sat his horse, motionless with the rest, as the Emperor swept the half circle.

‘ Major de Ségur,’ said the Emperor, ‘ tell the Poles to leave their cover and charge home. Lead them yourself.’

De Ségur stiffened and saluted. He did not see very clearly, but touched his horse with the spur, and the beast, fresh from a good meal of stolen oats the night before, leaped forward. The movement braced him. He tugged at his sabre, drew it and bent low over the saddle.

The ground, after the first ten yards, was even and his horse fell into a gallop, swerving at a touch of the left rein as it drew level with the hollow in which most of what was left of the Polish Light Horse had taken shelter. There came a dull booming and the air was alive with hissing balls. Grape, thought de Ségur, crouching lower over his horse’s neck. He could now see the Spanish guns plain enough, scarcely three hundred yards away. But between them and the hollow where the Polish Light Horse had taken refuge was open ground, without a patch of cover.

‘ It is impossible,’ murmured de Ségur to himself.

He pulled up his horse and recognised, in the

sallow-faced man who stared at him, Major Korjietulski, with whom he had played a hand at *écarté* the night before.

‘Emperor’s orders,’ he said. ‘We are to charge home.’

Korjietulski gazed at him for a moment. His mouth slowly opened as though he would protest. Then it shut with a snap. He dragged his horse round and shouted an order in Polish.

De Ségur was shouting too.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘The eyes of the Emperor are upon you.’

The men responded well. With strange cries they began to urge their mounts into the open. De Ségur drove his spurs home. His horse bounded forward. ‘If I am to die,’ he thought, ‘it shall be at the head of these men.’ Behind him the squadron broke into a gallop. The sun was bright now on the short grass and he could see the guns smoking and, about them, little dark figures growing every instant larger. Some of the gunners were whirling their lighted matches round their heads to keep the flame alive, and suddenly, as he watched, the line where earth and sky met in front of him became a bar of smoke with a base of spitting flame. Something whistled past him with a cry like a shrieking bird.

‘God, we shall never do it.’

That was his own voice, still human, not like some of those behind. He did not turn to look, but the hoof-beats were fewer and he wondered how many had gone down.

There came a sickening jar to his left thigh. A ball had struck the sheath of his sabre. He had now but one idea in his mind, to get to the guns; black mouths pointing over the breastworks of earth, wattle and

barrels constructed across the path.

There came a burning pain in his left side and for a moment he lost control. He bent his head, putting his hand to the place. His coat was in shreds and clinging to the rags was a strip of his flesh, large as his hand and torn from just above his heart.

The pain passed.

'The wound,' he thought, 'is either mortal or of no account. I must go on.'

He gripped the reins and, with his spurred heels, mechanically touched his horse.

'Fifty paces to go,' he said to himself.

He could now see the white of the gunners' eyes, but at that instant a heavy blow took him on the right side, and the sky, which a moment before was blue, went black. There was no air left in the world. His lungs were bursting and the pain in his side was such that he cried out.

His horse had stopped. Why was that? De Ségur turned his head. Behind him, twenty paces away, a Polish officer was swaying in the saddle, his face streaked and mottled with blood. The man crashed heavily to the ground and de Ségur realised that he was alone.

He tried to turn his horse.

Fifty yards in front of him the Spanish gunners were still busy. Two of them, blackened with powder, had slipped over the barrier and were coming towards him and, as he saw them, his horse reared suddenly and fell dead. De Ségur slipped clear, searing his raw flesh on the saddle. The two men seemed very near. They would serve him as they had served the Spanish general in the wood near Gamonal.

Rocks . . . rocks by the side of the road. If only he could reach them. He broke into a staggering run.

His boots took no grip of the short grass. He passed the Polish officer. A red foam bubbled from his open mouth and his horse lay on the earth kicking.

Rocks . . . he must find the rocks. Or should he make shift with that slab of grey stone on the right? He reeled towards it and fell at last in the shadow. For a moment he was aware of nothing. Then he heard, above the gunfire, the sound of someone sobbing. He looked up.

'Stop that,' he said. 'There's no time here for crying.'

A boy of perhaps sixteen, trumpeter of the squadron, was kneeling behind the rock. His face was bent over a dead man and in his hand he held the bridle of a live horse.

'Come,' said de Ségur, 'let's get out of this.'

Why did the pass, its sodden grass gleaming in the sunshine, tilt like that? 'If it tilts any further,' thought de Ségur, 'the whole army will go rolling down, Emperor, horses and guns.'

De Ségur looked about him and down at the sobbing boy.

'Put me on the horse,' he said, taking hold of the pommel of the saddle. 'You can lead me down from here under cover.'

The agony of climbing into the saddle was frightful and his face began to stream with sweat. The horse moved slowly across the rock-strewn grass. A bullet whistled past his head. Was there no cover anywhere? The ground was sloping more steeply now. Each step was a note of agony renewed. From somewhere in front came the beating of a drum. Or was that sound in his head?

'Infantry, sir,' said the Polish trumpeter, who had stopped crying now and was leading the horse downhill.

Those were drums all right, and that was the head of a column of Grenadiers, with their Colonel in front, moving steadily up the pass. De Ségur and the trumpeter stood in the path of the advancing regiment. Colonel Lagrange was leading them and de Ségur heard his name called as he swayed sideways. Strong hands were beneath his shoulders and he felt himself lifted.

'Christ, my side!' he moaned between clenched teeth.

Something burning and fiery touched his mouth. The face of Lagrange, oddly inverted, was above his own.

'My men will take you back,' said the Colonel.

De Ségur felt himself borne forward and a voice said sharply: 'Short paces and keep in step!'

The Grenadiers bearing him had halted. There was a man on a horse beside him. De Ségur looked up and saw Savary.

'The Emperor wishes to know how you are,' said Savary, leaning from the saddle.

At the word 'Emperor,' de Ségur half lifted himself from the arms which bore him.

'Tell His Majesty,' he said, 'that, if he throws in his infantry, he will have those guns in ten minutes.'

§ 8

Savary rode up to the redoubt at the head of the pass. Montbrun, charging again with his Polish remnant and the Chasseurs of the Guard, when the infantry had done its work among the high rocks, had ridden furiously in upon the guns and seized the batteries with small loss.

Savary slipped from his horse and, throwing the bridle over his arm, laid his cheek along the barrel of one of the pieces, whose crew sprawled dead about it.

The guns had been well placed and good use made of the walls of a ruined chapel. That second charge, he reflected, as he climbed back into the saddle, would have fared as ill as the first, if the Spaniards had only waited. It was Ruffin's men on the crests who had won the battle of Somosierra. Not that they were likely to get the credit. The Emperor needed a lively bulletin and that charge of the Polish Light Horse would give him the text.

The heights on either side of the pass were now dark and silent, but from the pass itself came a moaning, low and troubled, though none of it was from the redoubt. Those Polish devils had avenged their comrades and not a gunner but was lying dead.

'Savary.'

The Emperor, with half a dozen members of his staff, was riding past, some twenty yards away. Savary flicked his horse and joined the group.

'Sir?'

The Emperor was smiling. About time too, thought Savary.

'I'll have the Polish Horse armed with lances in the future,' said the Emperor. 'Make a note of it.'

'Sir,' said Savary again, feeling for his tablets.

'We will go back over the ground,' the Emperor continued.

At that moment an officer rode up.

'The enemy have evacuated Buitrago, sir,' said the officer, a young captain of Hussars.

The Emperor nodded.

'Tell General La Tour-Maubourg and General Lasalle to pursue the enemy as fast as they can. Their advance guards should be at the gates of Madrid at latest by tomorrow afternoon. I shall attack in force on the following day.'

The officer saluted and the Emperor turned back to Savary.

'We will go back over the field,' he repeated. 'Where is Ywan?'

'Your Majesty sent him to attend de Ségur,' answered Savary.

'Tell him to do everything possible. Have de Ségur evacuated in my carriage. We should have had Larrey. He is better at gunshot wounds.' The Emperor made to ride on, but paused a moment.

'My headquarters tonight will be at Buitrago. See to it, Savary.'

Savary turned to the officer nearest him.

'Instruct the Emperor's household train to fix general headquarters in Buitrago for tonight.'

Already the Emperor was twenty yards away and Savary spurred his horse to reach him. They rode in silence over the grassy top of the pass and into the defile. The moaning rose in intensity as they penetrated deeper into the field. For some three hundred yards they rode in silence, till they reached the place where the first charge of the early afternoon had been broken. The men lay scattered, but generally in a rough line right across the path. This had been their first engagement, Savary recalled, as he looked at the still figures with a professional eye. Certainly they had been well blooded.

'Marrac,' said the Emperor suddenly

'Sir?'

'Marrac,' repeated the Emperor. 'They were first on duty at Marrac, were they not?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Savary and marvelled again at his master's memory.

'They have done their duty as brave men,' said the Emperor.

The phrase came flatly. Perhaps it had done duty too often. Savary wondered for a moment what Napoleon would say to Walewska when he came to describe the incident. These men, sent to certain death against well-posted guns, were her own countrymen. They had given him substance for a bulletin. But to what had they been sacrificed? A deliberate gesture, misplaced contempt of the enemy or a fit of the spleen? Savary looked sidelong at Napoleon, but could not see his face. The Emperor was riding crouched upon the saddle, his eyes on the stunted grass sprinkled with dead or with shapes that stirred and made this pitiful moaning.

'All these men must be cared for,' said the Emperor suddenly. 'Give the necessary orders. They should be evacuated as quickly as possible to Buitrago and then to Madrid.'

He turned his horse as he spoke and Savary followed him back to the redoubt, where the ground was comparatively free, though there were still a few men of the Ninety-sixth lying where they had been caught by the last discharge of grape.

The Emperor reined in his horse so abruptly that Savary nearly ran him down.

'What is it?' he was saying. 'What are you doing here?'

A man stood in the failing light beside the Emperor's horse. He was a grenadier of the Ninety-sixth. He was bareheaded, his face drawn with pain, and he held himself erect propped on a musket, the barrel of which was embedded in the turf.

'Looking for my leg, sir,' mumbled the soldier through his grey moustache, and Savary saw that where his right leg should be there was nothing but a bloody strip of cloth wound tightly about the thigh

and secured in a tourniquet with a stick.

The man lifted his face and stared at the grey figure upon the horse. Suddenly his eyes lit. He raised his free hand and waved it in the air.

'Long live the Emperor,' he cried and fell unconscious on the grass.

§ 9

Bells. All Madrid hummed and clamoured with them, from the great bells of San Francisco el Grande to the small voices of San Antonio de la Florida. Joaquin Caro roused himself. The fire beneath the trees of the Prado had burnt itself out. It was cold and Joaquin shivered. He rose stiffly to his feet and groped in the pouch of his sheepskin coat for the remnant of sausage he had kept for breakfast. It was not there. Some bastard had stolen it. Marcial perhaps; or Diego.

As he looked about him, the riot of bells, which had died down, was suddenly renewed. The noise stirred his blood, so that he moved forward among the trees to join the group of peasants and townsmen which was growing larger every minute at the corner of the Prado where it joined the Calle de Alcala.

'What is it?' he shouted.

'It is a victory,' said a voice.

'The French are destroyed,' said another, an old man with sores about his mouth.

Joaquin threw back his head and shouted with the rest. But his voice, though it was one of many, was drowned in the clamour of the bells. He waved above his head the stick, into the end of which he had thrust several long nails, which was to serve him as a weapon in defence of the city. It would not perhaps be

needed now. The mob in the Prado swarmed about him. The men were cold and hungry, but cold and hunger were forgotten.

‘Our Lady of Great Power,’ a voice intoned.

It came from a tall priest, stinking of sweat and garlic. He had stretched his arms wide in the gesture of Our Saviour upon the Cross.

‘She has struck down the arch-devil and his hordes of sin.’

‘Kill the prisoners,’ yelled a voice. ‘Tear them to pieces.’

Joaquin joined in the cry and he found himself running with the rest. But where were the prisoners kept?

Suddenly, as he ran, he heard, above the noise of the bells, the beat of a galloping horse and saw riding past him a man in a tattered uniform. There was mud upon his white face and he was shouting in an effort to be heard.

‘What is it? What is he saying? Diego, what is it?’

Joaquin pulled at the shoulder of the man next him. Diego turned his head.

‘He says we are betrayed.’

‘What does he mean?’ demanded Joaquin. ‘What does he mean?’

He stopped running. The rest of the mob had stopped, too, and all stood silent a moment under the trees.

Someone called out to the man on the horse, who now could not move for the press.

‘Tell us of the victory.’

‘There is no victory,’ he shouted back, and would have continued, but at that moment came the tramp of marching feet. A regiment of infantry, passing down

the road away to the left, had come to a straggling halt. Some of the men broke their ranks and came towards the crowd, waving their muskets.

One of them spoke for the rest.

‘They put sand in our cartridges,’ he cried. ‘They sent us to fight the French, but the cartridges were loaded with sand.’

Joaquin stood bewildered with the rest. What was a man to believe? The bells proclaimed a victory, but these men spoke of betrayal. Sand in the cartridges. Someone must pay for that. But who was the traitor? It was difficult to know these days who ruled in Spain.

The soldiers, waving their useless muskets, were penetrating among the crowd, which closed behind them in knots and eddies, its purpose arrested and its will confused. Then, as Joaquin stood uncertain with the rest, a woman appeared above their heads, riding astride a mule. Her hair was scattered untidily over her shoulders; her face was distraught as though with pain; one naked breast thrust itself from her torn bodice.

‘Comrades,’ she shouted, ‘we are betrayed. The French are coming. Perales put sand in the cartridges . . . Perales . . . Perales. The Emperor will be here tonight.’

For a moment there was complete silence, as though a huge door had been shut upon them all. Then came such a yell as Joaquin had never heard and one which he helped to swell with the full force of his lungs.

‘Perales! Death to Perales! Death to the traitor! Betrayed . . . betrayed.’

The mob had started to run, but not fast enough for Joaquin. He was stronger and nimbler than the rest.

He thrust his way through the press till he reached the woman on the mule.

She was screaming continuously: 'Death . . . death. Follow . . . follow! Death to Perales!'

Joaquin recognised her as he ran. It was Doña Inez, Perales' whore. He had seen her more than once, elegant and simpering beside him as he drove out in the Prado. What had happened to change her into this? She had nothing on but a torn shift and she was mad with hate and rage.

'Death to Perales!'

The cry passed to the crowd which followed.

They swept into the Calle de Alcalá. Joaquin, brandishing his club, ran like a hound which has had a view. Doña Inez jumped from her mule, grasping at his neck to steady herself.

This, then, was the house; for already she was battering with bare fists at the door.

'Make way, lady.'

It was Diego speaking. Diego had an axe. He swung it high. The painted panel of the door splintered at the third blow and at the fourth the lock gave way. Not a moment too soon, for the pressure of the mob behind had made it impossible to strike again. The door splintered and Joaquin was thrust forward into a hall paved with black and white marble tiles. He was pushed through the hall and up the wooden stairs.

'Perales!'

At least twenty men must have seen him and shouted at the same instant. He stood at the head of the stairs. He was in a nightshirt and his feet were bare. Over the shirt was a brocaded gown and in his hand was a pistol.

Joaquin flung his club at the arm of the frightened man in the nightshirt, and, as he recounted afterwards,

the Blessed Mother herself must have guided his aim. The pistol fell and exploded as it struck the floor. Then Joaquin was aware of nothing but the white face of Perales.

Everyone was shouting. Something cracked like a stick. It was the arm of Perales which he held by the wrist. A shriek of agony tore through the snarling of the crowd, abruptly stilled as a boot stove in the screaming mouth. Joaquin, still holding the arm, set his foot to the body and pulled with all his strength. He could see nothing but a red mist, the faces of men dripping with sweat and the movement of their knees as they trampled.

§ 10

Pauline Borghese wanted to close the windows. Those dreadful guns, booming from the Invalides, were getting on her nerves. Fired at half-minute intervals they were celebrating yet another victory of her tiresome brother. He had been in Spain only a little over a fortnight, but already, it was said, he had settled everything and Joseph would soon be fixed firmly on his second throne.

Pauline looked across at her mother, who sat very upright on the hard uncomfortable chair she always chose as an obscure protest against the luxury of her children. The guns still thudded. But her mother liked to have the windows open, and there had been so many gloomy faces about them over this Spanish business that it should warm all loyal hearts to hear this music. Pauline, still in awe of the tall woman with the high thin nose, decided to let well alone.

For distraction she glanced sideways at her reflection in the mirror. Could that be a line underneath her right eye?

'Stop making faces in the glass,' said her mother sharply, 'and go and find out about this victory.'

Pauline shrugged her shoulders. Her mother never seemed to remember that her children were now all kings or princes or princesses, and that, being so, it was no longer seemly that they should be sent on errands.

She rang for the second chamberlain.

The door opened suddenly and Pauline swung round. It was not the second chamberlain, but the major-domo, who stood in the opening.

'Countess Walewska,' he said, 'desires to know if it is convenient for your Imperial Highness to receive her.'

Pauline nodded.

'Certainly,' she said.

This was a welcome diversion. The presence of Marie Walewska would hold her mother in check. There was, perhaps, a homily in store and Pauline was in no mood for homilies. She had too many debts and too many lovers, but all that was past mending and both the debts and the lovers had a tendency to increase.

The door opened again and Pauline watched the newcomer. Napoleon for once had chosen well. Those black brows above wide blue eyes went remarkably well with the fair hair. The neck, perhaps, was a thought too long, but what deliciously slim arms and shoulders.

Marie came to a halt in the middle of the room. She looked first at Pauline, then at her mother, and Pauline wondered in amusement what she would do. After a moment's hesitation Marie moved forward again and curtsied to Letizia Bonaparte.

Was that correct? Or should Marie have curtsied first to her hostess? What was the etiquette? And

what a bore it all was and what a fuss her Imperial brother made of it.

‘Madam,’ said Marie, scarce risen from her curtsy. ‘This news from Spain. Is it true?’

‘Sit down, child.’

Letizia pointed to a sofa beside her.

Marie obeyed, with a sidelong inclination to Pauline.

‘We have no details yet,’ said Letizia.

Marie, fumbling at her breast, pulled out a paper.

‘This is a copy of the bulletin. They are posting it everywhere.’

Letizia Bonaparte took the paper.

‘The Thirteenth Bulletin,’ she read. ‘Victory at Somosierra.’

She looked up from the sheet.

‘Another name to remember. Make a note of it, Pauline.’

Pauline raised her eyebrows. What was the use of trying to remember a name like that?

‘You see, madam.’

Marie pointed a finger at the printed text.

‘The Emperor says that it was the charge of the Polish Light Horse that decided the action and that they lost only eight killed and sixteen wounded.’

Letizia read the bulletin attentively and handed it back to Marie.

‘They were my own people,’ continued Marie eagerly. ‘And only eight were killed. That is very few, is it not?’

‘Very few,’ said Letizia drily, ‘and I notice that these gallant men, a hundred in all, were charging guns. It was not only a victory, my child. It was a miracle.’

The door opened again. The second chamberlain had at last appeared.

‘ You sent for me, your Imperial Highness.’

‘ Concerning the Emperor’s bulletin,’ said Pauline. ‘ Is there no more news than what is printed here?’

‘ Nothing, your Imperial Highness, except what is published.’

The voice of Letizia broke in, clear and peremptory. ‘ You have heard nothing. No gossip?’

‘ There are rumours,’ began the chamberlain, and paused.

‘ Go on, man.’

‘ The casualties are said to be heavier than is reported.’

Pauline looked at Marie, whose eyes were fixed on the chamberlain.

‘ Anything else?’

‘ It is stated that the Emperor’s Polish escort behaved with the greatest gallantry, charging a battery of sixteen guns under the eyes of His Imperial Majesty. According to one account some forty of them were killed and many others were seriously wounded.

‘ Their names? Please tell me their names.’

It was Marie speaking.

‘ I am afraid I cannot give you the names, madam.’

Letizia leaned forward slightly in her high chair.

‘ Be good enough to discover the names and bring them to us here as soon as possible.’

The chamberlain bowed and left the room.

Letizia had put her hands on Marie’s shoulder. Pauline watched them curiously. Marie was a little pale.

‘ It is not true,’ she was protesting. ‘ The Emperor in his bulletin says that only eight were killed.’

‘ I know those bulletins,’ said Letizia, ‘ and I do not like this one. He must have been in a fine temper to set cavalry charging a battery of guns.’

Just like mother, reflected Pauline. She always behaved as though Napoleon were playing a game and some day would grow tired of it and put away his toys. She saw clearly through the dust he raised, and for all his triumphs had but one refrain: *provided it lasts*.

‘Surely the Emperor would not lie to us!’

Marie, Pauline decided, had evidently a great deal to learn about her precious brother.

‘I had understood,’ Letizia continued, ‘that the Spaniards were of no account. They were peasants and bandits and had no generals. Why, then, do we need a bulletin?’

Through the open window, in the pause that followed, the guns from the Invalides shattered once again the silence that had fallen between them.

Letizia Bonaparte looked across at Pauline.

‘Shut the window,’ she said. ‘My son speaks louder than is necessary.’

§ II

‘I am sorry to be late.’

Fouché rose from his chair with a deprecating gesture.

‘It is of no consequence, my dear Talleyrand,’ he answered. ‘I know how busy you are.’

Talleyrand, limping forward, looked round the shabby back room of the Green Cockatoo, half gaming-house, half brothel, with an air of fastidious appreciation.

‘I hope to be busier soon,’ he said as he sat down.

Fouché looked uneasily about him. Talleyrand seemed very sure of himself, but one might commit oneself too soon and too far. The Emperor was doing better in Spain than anyone had expected.

‘By the way,’ continued Talleyrand, still with that irritating complacency. ‘I was followed to this place.’

‘My men,’ said Fouché.

‘My dear colleague. Is it possible that we do not trust one another?’

‘The Emperor’s orders, Talleyrand. Duroc conveyed them to me himself. I am to keep an eye on you.’

‘Then the Emperor has no suspicion of our alliance. Had he at the same time requested me to keep an eye on you, the position would be almost amusing.’

‘Did Duroc give you any special reason for keeping me in view?’ he continued more seriously.

Fouché shook his head.

‘The Emperor wishes that old fox to be watched is what he said. So tomorrow it will be reported to me that His Serene Highness the Prince of Benevento, dressed in a plain dark cloak and unattended, visited the Green Cockatoo.’

‘Fortunately my reputation is bad enough to explain such a visit. There will be no temptation to look for a political motive. If the place were respectable, it would be more difficult to account for my presence.’

Fouché moved uneasily.

‘Perhaps it would be better, for the moment, to have no further meetings,’ he suggested.

Talleyrand looked at him enquiringly, but Fouché stared past him at the opposite wall. Talleyrand leaned forward.

‘Further meetings,’ he said, ‘no longer appear to be necessary.’

Fouché’s eyes flitted from the wall, rested a mo-

ment on the face of Talleyrand and went back to the wall again.

‘No longer necessary?’ he echoed.

‘The time has come, I think, for a public gesture. We need no longer confer in this disreputable but sympathetic house. I propose, in fact, to stage a reconciliation and to let Paris know that we stand together.’

Fouché checked the protest that rose to his lips. Talleyrand must not suspect that he had any doubt or reluctance in declaring himself. But was this really the moment?

‘You heard the guns this morning at the Invalides?’ he enquired after a pause.

‘It was the Emperor’s intention that they should be heard.’

‘You have read the bulletin.’

‘It was the Emperor’s intention that it should be read.’

‘There was undoubtedly a victory and Napoleon at this moment is presumably dating his orders from Madrid.’

‘I never doubted there would be a victory,’ responded Talleyrand smoothly. ‘I am not sure, however, that it will add to His Majesty’s reputation. I am not a soldier, but, when I read that a small squadron of Light Horse captured sixteen guns posted in a strong position on the top of a mountain pass, I am strongly tempted to wonder what really happened. It was for that reason that I took steps to have a word with the officer who brought that remarkable despatch to Paris. He was a young Polish fellow with an unpronounceable name, but he had been at the battle and was not unwilling to talk.’

Fouché sat back in secret exasperation. Why

hadn't he arranged to see this officer himself? He had as yet had no first-hand reports from Somosierra, and it was humiliating to think that he had allowed himself to be forestalled. But he must not lose his equanimity over trifles. This was important. He was to hear what had really happened to make the old fox so sure of his ground.

'The bulletin,' continued Talleyrand, 'gives a deliberately false impression of what actually occurred. The Polish Light Horse charged twice and were twice repulsed. On the second occasion more than half of them were killed or wounded. That was not surprising. They were commanded to charge uphill and without cover of any kind. In front of them was a redoubt of sixteen guns. The Emperor, in fact, permitted himself a gesture which, by all the rules of war, was bound to result in a useless sacrifice of human life and, in the sequel, he has been compelled to issue a lying bulletin to cover his indiscretion.'

'But the attack succeeded?'

'A third attack by cavalry succeeded, but only after the battery had been outflanked by an adequate force of infantry.'

Talleyrand leaned forward across the table, and his voice for the first time had in it a note of animation.

'We are not children,' he said, 'to be impressed with words and gestures. You may say, perhaps, that this was a victory. But to order it in that way was the act of a madman, who, with one half of his brain, felt nothing but a desperate need for haste. It is true that the other half still worked as it should, for the infantry were at hand to save the position. But Napoleon is no longer in control of his faculties. At Somosierra he exhibited as a soldier the hysteria which has begun to inform his diplomacy. That, Fouché, is the begin-

ning of the end. He is at the mercy of any impulse that pricks his will at the moment. He blunders on the field of battle and then justifies his errors to the world. Such a man must certainly destroy himself. The Emperor's judgment is beginning to fail him even in the exercise of his special gift. The laws of war must yield to his impatience.'

Talleyrand ceased, and Fouché, looking fixedly at the curtained window, became aware that he was expected to state his views. But he did not speak.

'Well,' said Talleyrand, and there was a hint of challenge in his tone, 'are you convinced that my reading of the situation is correct?'

Fouché passed his tongue across his lips.

'Yes,' he said, and contrived to convey a warm sincerity in his utterance, 'I am convinced.'

Talleyrand sat back, smiling.

'Then we have reached a second stage in our relationship,' he said. 'I shall give a reception a week from today. It will be a large party, and you, my dear Fouché, will be the guest of honour. Our friendship will then be published. You will receive an invitation in due course.'

Fouché rose from his chair and bowed with a mock courtesy.

'I shall be deeply honoured to accept it,' he said.

§ 12

The Emperor shivered a moment and twitched his grey overcoat closer as he dismounted from his horse at the foot of the grand staircase. It was a cold December day and the Royal Palace of Madrid struck colder than the square outside.

Savary, climbing the staircase behind his master

between the bearskins of the old guard lining it on either side, wondered, not for the first time that morning, why they had come so suddenly on this visit to the capital. The Emperor had not spoken since they had left headquarters an hour before, and Savary had received most inadequate warning of his intention. All he had been able to do was to warn General Walther half an hour in advance of their approach.

He plodded wearily up the marble steps. This was de Ségur's work, but de Ségur was out of it. The doctors could not yet say whether he would live or die.

What impulse had brought the Emperor to Madrid? He had steadily refused to enter his latest capture among the capitals of Europe, choosing instead to stay in that uncomfortable country house of Chamartin. Nor would he allow King Joseph to take possession, but had packed him off to the Royal Palace of El Pardo to the north-west. It had looked as though he would never set foot in the evil city.

Savary quickened his pace, for Napoleon was now walking swiftly from the top of the staircase through the ante-rooms, whose doors were flung open one by one as he approached by two Spanish chamberlains. Savary was reminded of his own progress through these doors some six months before, when he had come on his mission to Ferdinand. Here was the very room with its fantastic tiles where he had talked with Escoiquiz.

The Emperor had paused and was addressing one of the chamberlains.

'The portrait is in the next room, Your Majesty,' the man was saying in his Spanish accent.

They passed into a smaller room hung with red damask which gave it a semblance of warmth. Upon a wall to the left hung a picture in a gilt frame. Napoleon

halted in front of it, his legs wide apart and his head thrown back. Savary, taller by several inches, gazed at the painting over his master's shoulder. It was that of a man in a suit of dark velvet with a small white ruff at the neck. The face was pale, almost bloodless and of a curious transparency; a bony structure tightly covered with an ivory parchment from under which the flesh had wasted. The forehead was high and narrow; the eyes concentrated and yet remote, the eyes of a fanatic; the mouth would have been thin and secret had it not been for the Hapsburg lip.

Savary realised that before him was a portrait of Philip II of Spain.

The Emperor stood motionless, except for a twisting and untwisting of his fingers in the small of his back. Was it for this he had come? Savary could not remember much about King Philip II. But was he not the Spanish King who had fought all his life and with small success against Elizabeth of England? There had been, he seemed to remember, an Armada, a big fleet of invasion, destroyed in English waters and Philip had never recovered from the blow. Savary wished he could remember more of English history.

The minutes passed. Still the Emperor did not move. What had he come to see? What message did he read in that wasted face? Savary shivered slightly. The room was cold; cold as his thoughts; cold as that great barracks of a country house at Chamartin. These Spaniards seemed not to care how they lived. They were content to burn or freeze as God willed.

The Emperor moved at last. He turned, looked straight at Savary without speaking and then began to walk back the way he had come. Savary, rooted for a moment with astonishment, started back to life

and followed him from the room.

The Emperor, apparently, had fulfilled his purpose. All the way back to headquarters he said not a single word, but rode faster than usual, surrounded by his Chasseurs of the Guard. The countryside was deserted until they came in sight of Chamartin with its four pepper-pot turrets and red brick walls, enlivened with arches in relief that supported nothing but majolica tiles in meaningless patterns. But its colour, at least, was warm, and Savary recalled the small room, hung with red damask, to which they had made their curious pilgrimage.

‘Come to me in a quarter of an hour,’ said Napoleon, as he slid from the saddle.

Savary saluted. That would give him time to have a word with General Walther about the billets of the Old Guard, concerning which there was much complaint. He walked off to General Walther’s office, but Walther was out inspecting the camp, so he made his way back to the Emperor’s apartments on the first floor. The ante-rooms through which he passed were crowded with officers on duty, aides-de-camp, chamberlains and, here and there, a page. They sat about on the stiff Spanish furniture of olive wood and leather, or jostled for a place round the charcoal pans, *braseros* the Spaniards called them, which were all the heating to be had. Most of the faces were dejected. Nothing could look less like the staff of a victorious army led by a victorious Emperor.

Savary paused to take a copy of the Madrid Gazette from one of the pages before entering his master’s room. Perhaps the Emperor would want to dictate, and his hands were frozen. He thrust the Gazette under his arm, and a young aide-de-camp made way for him at one of the braziers, so that he could warm

his chilled fingers in the draught of hot air rising from the charcoal. His mind went back persistently to the spectacle of the Emperor standing silently in front of the portrait of Philip.

'Do you know anything about the Armada?' he demanded suddenly of the young aide-de-camp who had given him his place by the brazier.

The young man stiffened to attention.

'No, sir,' he said. 'Never heard of the place. Shall I look it up on the map?'

Savary stared at the vacant, ingenuous face for a moment.

'You will find it at the bottom of the sea,' he said abruptly, and turned back to the brazier.

He massaged his fingers a moment longer in the warm air and, when he felt the blood returning to them, passed through the door into the Emperor's presence. Napoleon, still wearing his grey overcoat, was striding up and down at the far end in front of a blank wall where there should, in any reasonable house, have been a fireplace. Duroc was also there and the inevitable Méneval. On a great trestle table projecting a little from another wall lay the maps of the campaign, bristling with pins.

The Emperor had part of a letter in his hand.

'My brother must be out of his mind.'

He opened the letter as he spoke and glared at the writing.

'How can he dare to say that it makes him blush before his subjects when they are invited to obey laws which he himself has never seen or sanctioned? Is he the law-giver or am I? Who placed him on the throne? Who has had to come from Paris with a hundred thousand men to put him there?'

The Emperor looked up from the letter, first at

Duroc, then at Savary. Both remained silent. The black mood was no longer silent, but voluble.

‘My brother can, if he likes, go back to Italy, or better still, he can sit in the Tuileries and be deputy for me when the real work is to do elsewhere.’

The Emperor turned and began striding up and down the room. Savary cleared his throat to speak and stepped forward with his copy of the Madrid Gazette.

‘It would seem, sir,’ he said, ‘that the town is making its submission to His Majesty, your brother, very rapidly. It is announced that ten quarters of the city and sixty-four barrios have joined in a formal petition for the restoration of a sovereign who unites so much kindness of heart with so cordial an interest in the welfare of his subjects.’

Napoleon lifted his head and a slow smile spread over his countenance.

‘I think we shall have to grant that petition,’ he said gravely.

He did not take the proffered Gazette, but turned on his heel and walked across the room to where the maps lay on the table. For a moment he stood looking down at the pins with their tops of coloured wax.

‘Savary,’ he called.

Savary moved nearer to the Emperor until he could see the map, though he already had by heart the disposition of the troops: Lefebvre to the south-west with the Fourth Corps, supported by Victor and the cavalry of Latour-Mauberg, Lasalle and Milhaud; in the centre, available for a blow in any direction, the whole of the Imperial Guard, Ney’s corps and the divisions of Lapisse and Laval; Soult to the north-west, with his headquarters at Carrion in Old Castille; towards Saragossa, Lannes, reinforced with the whole of

Mortier's corps from Vittoria.

The Emperor pointed to the pins that straggled towards Saragossa.

'Lannes will have started the siege yesterday,' he said. 'The place should fall in a month. But where are the English? Why do I never get any reports? If Moore were a competent general I should know where to find him. He should concentrate at Salamanca. But the man may be as big a fool as the miserable Blake. If I get no message tonight, I shall order the Duke of Dalmatia to move westward. The English must be somewhere between the Douro and the sea. The Duke has fifteen thousand infantry and two thousand light cavalry. With this he can command everything from the Douro to the Bay of Biscay.'

The door had opened behind them and there came a light clatter of spurs on the stone floor. Both Savary and the Emperor straightened themselves from the map and looked round. An officer, his green hussar uniform dark with rain and sweat, stood stiffly to attention. Duroc hastened forward and took from the man a sealed despatch.

Duroc walked quickly to the Emperor.

'From the Duke of Dalmatia, sir.'

The Emperor broke the seal. The silence while he read was absolute till he looked up from the paper, a man transformed.

'The English,' he said, 'at last! I have them. It is just as I expected. They have been concentrated at Salamanca. Moore is marching on Soult. I shall march south-west with every available man. By God, Savary, they cannot escape me now. The campaign is finished.'

Savary bending over the map felt a pain in his left ear. The Emperor was like a boy released from school.

‘Méneval,’ he said over his shoulder, ‘add this to the instructions for my brother Joseph: Order it to be put into the Madrid newspapers and spread in every direction that thirty-six thousand English are surrounded and lost. If the enemy makes any serious attempt on Aranjuez, celebrate my victory, fire the cannon and receive the congratulations. The news will soon reach you.’

The Emperor turned to Duroc and took him familiarly by the arm.

‘You think it unlucky, my friend, to anticipate the future. But by the twenty-seventh I shall reach Medina de Rio Secco. The English will have Soult in front of them and I shall be upon their rear. If by that time they have not retreated they must surrender, and, if they retire, they will be pursued so closely to their ships that half of them will never re-embark.’

Duroc shook his head gravely.

‘You commit yourself, sir.’

The Emperor moved impatiently.

‘Very well, Duroc. Very well. I am committed.’

CHAPTER XIII

§ I

FELIX MARBOT, guest for that evening of Talleyrand, Prince of Benevento, was reassured, on approaching the house in the Rue de Varenne, to find that he was unlikely to be conspicuous. The ex-Minister of External Relations had cast his net pretty wide and the carriages stretched from his door in a solid block for a hundred yards to right and left.

After waiting in the jam for a quarter of an hour, he dismissed his hired coachman, though it was an ill night for walking, and pushed his way on foot to the entrance, where Jorris, the Prince's major-domo, stood announcing the new arrivals. In due course his own name was called as he set foot on the marble stairs.

He had been puzzled, even a little dismayed, by his invitation. It was true that, as a page of the Emperor, he was automatically on the lists of persons of the Imperial household who would normally be asked to the balls and receptions given by the high dignitaries of the Empire. But Talleyrand was exclusive in his hospitality and it was said that no one was ever admitted to his house without a reason.

If the great man only knew. Felix sweated beneath the scarlet of his magnificent coat. There would be short shrift for him if Talleyrand ever suspected that he,

Felix, had with his own ears heard him talk treason to the Czar of Russia. But he had been told to hold his tongue about that. Duroc had been very clear on the subject. He was to speak of that incident to no one.

He had wondered more than once whether his warning had been conveyed to the Emperor. Talleyrand remained in Paris, at liberty to commit as much treason as he liked, and, from all accounts, he was committing it pretty freely. Sayings were running from mouth to mouth in which he criticised the Emperor's conduct and even went so far as to hint that Spain would make an end of his reputation.

Felix had not wanted to come to the reception, but his mistress, who had of course been invited, but who went out hardly at all when the Emperor was away, had insisted that he should go and bring back news of the event. Time in Paris hung heavily on his hands, but in Paris he must stay. Walewska had written to the Emperor once or twice, but the letters had been sent in the ordinary mails by Lavalette, and to Felix there seemed little chance of ever going to Spain. When would he be able to serve the Emperor, like his brother Marcellin, on the field of battle? He was devoted to Walewska, but it was poor meat for his ambition to be running small errands from the house in the Rue d'Houssaye when the Emperor needed soldiers. His place was with the Poles who had behaved so superbly at Somosierra and of whom his mistress was so proud. How she had thrilled at the news! Felix had caught the contagion of her pride, but not of her sorrow at the casualty list. For how could a man die better than those men had died?

'Cardinal Albani,' said a voice beside him.

Felix watched the prelate moving in his scarlet

through the wide room hung with lemon-yellow damask. The candles made it dreadfully hot and, whether cardinal or page, one sweated like a cook on a summer's day. Who was that swarthy man who looked like a Spaniard? Felix recognised Monsieur de Lima, who was said to be descended from a famous Moorish house, all massacred by a Sultan of Granada. There, too, was Monsieur de Narbonne and the whole pack of the Faubourg Saint Germain. It was only in Talleyrand's house that they consented to meet Imperial society.

There came a flurry of fine coats by the door as the guests made way for a man who had just entered. Everyone was looking and a sudden silence fell on the room. Felix craned to see who it was that had made so deep an impression.

'Impossible,' muttered a man beside him, a young secretary from the Austrian embassy.

Felix stared towards the door in amazement. The young secretary touched him on the arm.

'Excuse me, sir,' he began, 'but is not that Monsieur Fouché?'

'It is,' he said shortly, and looked again to be sure.

Fouché seemed wholly unaware of the sensation he was creating. He was dressed in green velvet and responding affably to the greetings he received. The thin smile was untroubled and there was not a flicker on his face to show that he was in the least embarrassed by the fact that the attention of the whole room was upon him as he walked forward.

Everyone was staring. This is some mistake, thought Felix. Or had Fouché come, not as an invited guest, but in discharge of his office? The Emperor, so his mistress had told him, had given orders that Talleyrand was to be watched by the Minister of Police.

There came another flurry in the crowded room. Heads were turning to the far corner where, as Felix now perceived, Talleyrand himself was receiving his guests. As if by common consent the throng divided, leaving a clear lane for the new arrival to reach his host, and another silence fell as Talleyrand, seeing Fouché, came down the room, his ebony stick tapping on the polished floor. The two men met almost beside Felix, who was standing half-way between the two doors.

Talleyrand gave Fouché both his hands.

‘My dear Minister, how charming of you! This is too kind.’

Felix did not catch Fouché’s reply, for Talleyrand took his guest by the arm and began to walk back with him to the top of the room. The people on either side, recovering their manners, bowed as the two figures passed, but hardly a word was spoken till they had vanished through the door into the next room.

Then, at last, tongues were loosed again and such a babel it was that Felix was almost deafened.

‘Fouché and Talleyrand!’

‘Incredible!’

‘They haven’t been on speaking terms for years past.’

‘What can have happened?’

‘Took him by the arm. Did you see?’

Felix listened for a moment to the buzz and then turned to go. He had seen and heard enough. He must take this news to his mistress.

§ 2

‘Well,’ said Talleyrand, ‘have we shown ourselves to the people sufficiently?’

Fouché scarcely moved his thin lips.

'I scarcely think it necessary to repeat the performance,' he replied.

Talleyrand pushed open the folding doors in front of him and motioned Fouché to pass through into the library. Fouché made his way towards the hearth in which an open fire was burning. He was feeling oddly at peace. The torment of indecision, with its fine-drawn agonies of calculation, was for the moment past. It would recur if some new factor came to trouble the reckoning, but here and now his conduct was fixed.

He stood smiling into the fire as Talleyrand closed the door behind him. There was almost a glow on his face. He had enjoyed that sensational progress of a moment ago, as he always enjoyed the rare occasions when, putting aside all misgiving, he took the irrevocable step and affirmed in action the results of his long brooding on events. He even took a pleasure in the qualms he had decided to ignore. They gave a finer edge to his bravado.

The scene, too, had been amusing in its way. To the great ladies of the faubourg, like Madame de Laval or Madame de Choiseul, it must have seemed like the end of the world to see their dear Prince linking arms with the man whom they held responsible for all the crimes of the Revolution. But they had watched the exhibition with smooth faces. Their breeding had not permitted them to show the least sign of astonishment, surprise or dismay.

The new nobility had been less able to control its amazement. These were men like himself, soldiers or civilians, who had climbed from something very low to something high, and they had frankly stared as he had passed slowly through the crowded rooms on the arm of his host, who was now settling himself comfortably in the chair by the leaping flames.

Fouché, taking the opposite seat, glanced over his shoulder at the double doors which Talleyrand had closed behind them.

‘Yes,’ said Talleyrand, following the glance, ‘there must be a good many pairs of eyes fixed on those panels, and their owners must wish that their ears were as long as those of King Midas so that they might overhear us now.’

‘We have at least given Paris something to talk about,’ responded Fouché.

Talleyrand was silent a moment.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘the Emperor has not yet entered Madrid. He was free to do so nearly a fortnight ago.’

Fouché nodded.

‘Presumably he does not wish to compromise the position of his brother. Joseph, after all, is King of Spain.’

The eyes of Talleyrand, he noted, were oddly bright this evening, and, though his face was as impenetrable as ever, Fouché detected in his voice an undertone of excitement.

‘Is he also afraid that his brother may compromise himself? King Joseph has not entered Madrid either. Our master keeps him shut up in the Palace of the Pardo, well away from the city. No, Fouché, the reason why the Emperor does not enter Madrid is that he fears the effects of a hostile, or even of a sullen, reception. He hoped that he would be received with acclamation as a deliverer or that he would at least be able to stage an effectively heroic appearance. But things go badly in Spain. Did you ever hear of a conqueror who dared not show himself to the conquered?’

Talleyrand paused a moment. Then, as Fouché made no comment, he rose from his chair and limped

across the room towards a small inlaid writing-desk with thin straight legs. A poor piece of furniture, was Fouché's private opinion, compared with the splendid mahogany-and-bronze desk which stood in his own library and contained so many of his secrets. Talleyrand unlocked a drawer and returned, bearing a paper. Fouché took it, and, as he read, drew in his lips.

'Very tiresome,' said Talleyrand. 'I had to write it in my own hand; legibly, too, and in the clearest terms, for Murat is a poor scholar and not very good at reading between the lines.'

Fouché studied the letter in silence. It certainly left no doubt as to its meaning. His Majesty the Emperor, it pointed out, was deeply involved in Spain. The news from that country showed clearly that the task which he had set himself was one of peculiar difficulty and danger. That being so, wise men, who had the interests not only of the Emperor but of France at heart, were seriously concerning themselves with the situation which might possibly arise in the event of His Majesty's death on the field of battle or failure to return. It was to be hoped that any such calamity would be averted. If, however, Providence saw fit to order otherwise, his loyal subjects must be prepared to face the consequences.

Fouché turned the page.

There were two formal sentences deploring the fact that there was no heir to the Imperial Crown. The throne, however, should it fall vacant, must not be allowed to remain so a moment longer than was necessary. Otherwise, the fruits of the Revolution, of which His Majesty was the heir, would be lost and France herself be robbed of the magnificent achievements of her present ruler. A strong man was needed, ready to claim the throne immediately and thus prevent civil

anarchy and a dismemberment of the Empire comparable only to that which had befallen the Empire of Alexander after his untimely death. The letter concluded in plain terms:

We therefore beg Your Majesty to hold yourself ready to abandon the throne of Naples for the throne of France, and we would urge you to be ready, should the need arise, to ride to Paris without loss of time upon receipt of intelligence from us. To that end we propose a simple code word which can be sent by visual telegraph to the frontier, whence it can be taken by special messenger direct to Your Majesty in Naples. The word we suggest is RUBICON, bearing in mind that Your Majesty will be invited to follow in the steps of that prototype of all Emperors, Julius Caesar, who at a moment great with destiny was called upon to take a similar decision.

The letter ended with a few formal phrases. It was signed 'Talleyrand de Périgord' with a space between the signature and the final sentences.

Fouché looked up after he had finished reading it.

'I hope,' said Talleyrand smoothly, 'that, in view of the person to whom the letter is addressed, you find the wording satisfactory, but of course any suggestions you may care to make . . .'

He broke off and stood looking across at Fouché.

'I would merely suggest,' continued Talleyrand a little wearily, 'that, if you wish to make any extensive alterations, you would be so kind as to write out the letter again yourself. I find such manual exercise most confoundedly irksome.'

Fouché, in sudden irritation, dropped his eyes to the paper on his knee. All this rather tired negligence was getting on his nerves.

'But I, too, can be cold and calm,' he said to himself, and raised his head.

'The wording of the letter seems to me to be ad-

mirable,' he said. 'My only doubt is whether the moment has come to despatch it.'

Talleyrand turned without speaking and Fouché watched him take a pace or two over the grey Aubusson carpet, noting irrelevantly the furnishings of the room in which he sat. It was not unlike his own library, yet there was a difference. There was a lack of ornament about the severe Ionian half pillars that divided the big shelves on which stood thousands of volumes, row upon row, in an ordered array of learning. Their bindings of leather or vellum gleamed faintly in the candle-light. Everything was in place, but the room had about it an air of use. This was the room in which that pale-faced man worked and schemed, once his dangerous enemy now his more dangerous friend.

Talleyrand turned slowly, tilted his head so that the nostrils of his upturned nose showed as two black pits in his pale face.

'Perhaps,' said Talleyrand softly, 'you will be good enough to tell me your reasons. It is never wise to be impetuous.'

Fouché made a pretence once more of reading the letter.

'No, Talleyrand,' he said. 'I am convinced. The letter should go at once.'

'Then you will perhaps be good enough to sign it. I have, as you see, left you the place of honour.'

Fouché rose from his chair. Together they crossed the wide room to the desk. Talleyrand gave Fouché the pen and scattered the sand on his signature. He sealed the letter and handed it to Fouché.

'You are better able to arrange for its despatch than I am,' he said. 'But I suggest a special messenger.'

'You may leave that to me.'

Now that his boats were burned Fouché felt cold,

quiet, almost happy again. His mouth, however, was a little dry.

‘A glass of wine,’ suggested Talleyrand.

He limped away towards the hearth where a bell-rope hung from the wall. Half-way he stopped and turned back.

‘It would perhaps be better if we went together to the buffet,’ he said with a smile.

Together they walked to the double doors.

The drawing-rooms were still crowded with guests, though there were not quite so many, for supper was being served in the dining-room and in the long gallery. The great sensation had not yet subsided. Men stared and women whispered. At the end of the room was a table covered with white damask and, behind it, footmen in the Prince’s livery.

Fouché was conscious of a great silence as Talleyrand pledged him in a glass of champagne.

§ 3

Half an hour later Fouché was seated in his own library. A pile of papers lay under his left hand. His ceremonial coat was cast aside and he wore the yellow quilted dressing-gown in which he felt at ease. The tight shoes which had imprisoned his feet were thrust away under the desk and he wrinkled his toes, pleasantly free at last.

In the mirror above the desk he saw that the door of the room had opened. He turned sharply. To be disturbed at that hour meant something of importance. His secretary stood waiting. Fouché raised a beckoning hand and Tisset moved forward.

‘This came an hour ago, your Excellency.’

Fouché took the paper, the decipher of a visual

telegraph message from Bayonne.

'A bulletin published in Madrid the day before yesterday,' he read, 'announces that the Emperor has located the English forces consisting of thirty-six thousand men. The Emperor has started in pursuit and the English, surrounded on all sides, are on the point of surrender.'

'Has no one seen this besides yourself?' demanded Fouché, after a pause.

'No one, Excellency,' answered Tisset quietly, 'but I imagine it has been sent to the Moniteur.'

'In that case the news will be public tomorrow.'

Tisset bowed. Fouché reflected a moment.

'I shall want a special messenger,' he began.

'Yes, Excellency?'

Fouché looked at Tisset.

'No,' he continued. 'On second thoughts, perhaps not. I will ring.'

Tisset bowed again and left the room.

Fouché rose from his desk and began to walk up and down. What precisely was the significance of this further news from Spain? Was it true? And if true, did it materially affect the situation? If the Emperor had as good as disposed of the English forces, he would shortly be back in Paris.

Fouché paused in his pacing, staring at the fire. Should he consult Talleyrand, tell him the news, send him an urgent message? Slowly he shook his head.

Talleyrand would not be moved by this intelligence. Talleyrand had made up his mind that the Emperor was heading, quickly or by slow degrees, for disaster. Talleyrand's genius, moreover, was that of the gambler. He had thrown down his stakes and was unlikely to withdraw. To the man who had betrayed his master

at Erfurt this present venture was, in any case, but a sequel.

No, Talleyrand would not easily be turned aside. Was there no way but either to follow him or to break with him? To follow him was rash. What if the Emperor should return victorious? Their lives would lie at the discretion of Murat, who was a blockhead, and of his shrewish wife.

Should he, then, break with Talleyrand before it was too late? Burn the letter or, better still, denounce him to the Emperor and rid himself once for all of an old enemy? But that meant staking all he had on the Emperor's success, just as Talleyrand was staking all he had on the Emperor's ruin.

Was there no middle way? Was there no means of providing against both events?

Fouché stared into the mirror as though he would consult his only possible counsellor.

Suppose the letter were intercepted? Not, of course, openly by his agency, but by some indirect process which he might claim to have initiated or utterly repudiate according to circumstances.

He was beginning to see his way.

If the letter were intercepted and he could prove that he had arranged for its interception, he would be able to appear, if necessary, as the faithful servant of the Emperor. He would, of course, have to explain the small matter of his having signed the letter, but he could plausibly say that he had deliberately encouraged Talleyrand in his design and put his name to the letter in order to obtain clear proof of Talleyrand's treachery. He must also be able to convince Talleyrand, if the need arose, that the interception of the letter was an accident for which he was in no way responsible.

He walked to his desk and picked up the despatch.

For a long while he stood motionless, weighing it in his hand. Then, abruptly, he sat down, addressed it formally to the King of Naples and rang a bell.

Tisset came to the desk. Fouché handed him the letter.

‘Have this despatched at once,’ he said.

The man bowed and began to cross the room.

‘One moment, Tisset. The letter is to go, not by special messenger, but by the ordinary post. You understand?’

‘Perfectly, Excellency,’ answered Tisset.

§ 4

Guardsman Laval plodded steadily forward. The snow came down in small flakes, driving straight into his face. This was worse than Eylau, and he had never thought to see such weather again. He had long lost all feeling in his hands and face. His moustaches were two jets of frozen hair adhering stiffly to his upper lip. His blue coat was as white as his breeches and his straps.

The storm had fallen upon them early that morning among high white hills to the north of Madrid, the Guadarrama or some such name, and their immediate destination was the small town of Villa Castin on the farther side. But he was beginning to doubt whether they would ever see a town again. The road wound up the mountain-side. At least that was what he supposed, for he could see nothing but the snow and only the drag on his feet told him that he was marching uphill.

They would never get across the pass at this rate, but would die there, frozen in their tracks.

‘Halt. Pass the word along!’

The voice of Dubois, the man in front of him, was caught and swept away by the icy wind.

Laval brought his musket down from his shoulder and stood looking down at his blue hands. The curtain of snow shifted as though twitched aside by an invisible hand and he saw at last where they were. The road was steep and narrow and, on his right, the mountain fell away so sharply as to form a precipice. Looking from beneath his bearskin he saw, on the section of the road immediately behind him, a mass of men, guns and carriages. That was the artillery, the artillery of the Guard, stuck fast in the snow.

Blinking his eyes to shake the flakes from his lashes, he saw something of what was happening on the road above. A horse had slipped with its rider. Its hind legs tore frantically at the snow, the rider leaning forward along its neck in a vain effort to urge it back to safety. Pierre Laval watched with a kind of dull fascination. The struggles of the horse seemed to last an eternity. Only its fore-feet were now on the road and, as he watched it, they too slipped away. Down the horse came, rolling over and over, the rider, a green Hussar, falling clear of it, till, one after the other, they struck a boulder and vanished without a cry over the edge of the precipice.

Laval looked again towards the top of the pass where waves and eddies of snow were raised by the lashing of the wind. The spume of it was tossed high into the air. Up there it must be blowing a hurricane. How could they ever get across and what was the use of trying? Why were they marching through this bloody country to fight the bloody English? Marching was well enough on a good straight road with trees on either side and, at that picture, which his mind created for him, he longed suddenly and passionately for

France and the plains of Picardy, where you could march all day long at a steady three miles an hour and your pack did not feel as though it were stuffed with lead.

‘Christ, I’m going to fall out.’

It was his neighbour, Godard, speaking.

‘You can’t do that,’ muttered Laval.

Godard must not fall out. The Guard kept its ranks and marched and fought and died in them. So said the officers, and it was true. But Godard had only had six years’ service and had no right to be in the Guard at all.

‘It’s stopped snowing,’ shouted Laval by way of comfort.

But if it had stopped snowing, the wind was worse than ever, as though it were a Spanish wind raging against the invaders.

‘Move to the side, there!’

The order passed from frozen mouth to frozen mouth, and obediently Laval began to shuffle sideways. A short figure, on foot in a grey overcoat and wearing a plain black hat with the tricolour on it, was trudging up the road up to its knees in snow.

The Emperor, as he passed Laval, turned his head. For a moment their eyes met and Laval stiffened to attention. But the Emperor’s glance passed swiftly over him and beyond, sweeping the ranks.

‘What’s this?’ he asked. ‘Is the Guard to be stopped by snow? Keep moving, lads, or you’ll freeze.’

He had a little riding-whip in his hand and he pointed upwards.

‘Villa Castin is beyond the pass. You can see it from the top on a fine day.’

A whirl of snow hid him for a moment from Laval,

though he was but six feet away.

When it cleared the Emperor was addressing the sergeant.

‘Get your men to sing. Nothing like a good song. And mark time, lads, to keep the blood moving.’

The men looked wearily at the sergeant, and abruptly the Emperor stepped back a pace.

‘By God,’ he cried, ‘I will drill you myself.’

He was dangerously near the edge of the precipice, and Laval had an impulse to throw down his musket, step forward and clutch him before he was swept over. But the Emperor, gesturing with his whip, had motioned his staff in their fur-trimmed dolmans to stand back. Then he tucked the whip into his right armpit, like a sergeant on parade. His head went back, and his body stiffened.

‘Old Guard!’ he shouted as on the parade ground. ‘Quick, mark time!’

Laval began to shuffle his feet.

‘Pick ’em up, lads! Pick ’em up.’

The Emperor’s voice was hard and shrill and Laval lifted his knees high.

‘That’s better. Trample it down. We’ll level the snow for the guns, but we need a song for that,’ and the man in the grey coat began all at once to sing in a tuneless voice:

‘Malbrouk s’en va-t’en guerre,
Miron-ton, miron-ton, mirontaine,
Malbrouk s’en va-t’en guerre,
Ne sait quand reviendra.’

Laval could not see the Emperor very clearly. What was the song? There was no tune in it at all. But, of course, the Emperor never could hit one note more than another. The words, however, were familiar:

‘ Monsieur Malbrouk est mort,
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,
Monsieur Malbrouk est mort,
Est mort et enterré.’

Laval, trampling the snow, took up the tune with a hundred others.

‘ A l’entour de sa tombe,
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine,
A l’entour de sa tombe,
Romarins l’on planta.’

Even that poor fish, Godard, was singing.

‘ A l’entour de sa tombe.
Mironton, mironton, mirontaine.’

Guardsman Pierre Laval threw back his head and roared, one of ten thousand men, beating down the snow beneath their heavy feet, their eyes on the little grey man moving now back towards the head of the column below to disengage his guns.

§ 5

Rifleman Harris, on the march, came with a start out of his reflections. It was his habit to dream a little and call up pictures from the past to keep himself going: summer days with the sheep; long frosty nights in lambing time; the face of his father with hair as white as the sleet on the Downs; the day when he had been drawn as a soldier for the army of Reserve; the summer afternoon when he had formed one of the firing party who had shot the deserter on Portsdown Hill; pleasant days in Copenhagen among the blue-eyed Danish lasses; the fine ships in the harbour when, with twenty thousand men, he had embarked for Portugal.

But the pictures grew fainter as the time went by.

There was left in him little life for thoughts.

They had been marching for forty-eight hours, with only four breaks of three hours each. The snow had been bad enough, but the heavy thaw which had set in that morning had made matters worse. At every step his gaiters sank to the fourth button. At this rate there would soon not be a sound boot left in the company. Not that he cared. He was past mending boots for anybody. When would they turn and fight? What was the use of marching right across Portugal and into Spain only to march back again? For that was what they were doing: marching back to their ships as hard as they could go; and all because Boney was said to be coming up over the hills. Young Mr. Stanhope had tried to explain that they must either retreat or allow themselves to be taken in flank and surrounded, which explained nothing except that the staff had made a more than usually bloody mess of everything.

To make matters worse there were the women. He wasn't married himself and would never have allowed a woman to follow him to the wars. It was heart-breaking to see them. They came along the front after the fighting to ask after their men.

There was that woman whom he had taken to find the corpse of her husband, not five days ago. She had pulled out a prayer book and read the funeral service. Then he had helped her to bury her man. She was a handsome woman and grateful for the small attentions he had been able to pay her during the hardships of the march and, after that night in the straw in a filthy little town which they had reached after dark, he had offered to marry her, being light-headed and carried away by one of those strange intimacies into which soldiers so swiftly fall. But the woman had refused. She did not want to marry another soldier, and had wept suddenly

to find herself in his arms with poor George scarcely settled in his grave.

It was a mistake to allow women to follow the troops. They struggled along as best they could, but they were not allowed in the ranks, and God knows how many had straggled since the retreat began or what had happened to them afterwards.

How far was it now to the coast? His mind wandered again, this time to the day when he had first seen the Rifles in their bottle-green coats. That had been in Dublin, and he had watched them go past at the quick-step with their rifles swinging at the trail, down St. Stephen's Green, one hundred and forty paces to the minute, with the fifes at their head. His heart had cried out to join them, and join them he had, with the result that he had come to Spain to look for the French, and now Boney was looking for him and they were all going back to their ships.

'Get back in the ranks there!'

Young Mr. Stanhope was cursing someone who had fallen out. The men were beginning to straggle badly, and Harris suddenly realised that Johnson, the little cockney, was no longer at his side. Then someone lurched against him—Johnson, back in the ranks again and spitting curses. Over his shoulder loomed the red face of young Mr. Stanhope.

'Leave the ranks again and you'll stay out for good with a ball through your blasted head. I'll have no stragglers in the Ninety-fifth.'

'Come on, lads,' he continued, to the men, 'what about a song?'

A gust of rain, warm after the icy blasts of yesterday, struck Harris in the face. Young Mr. Stanhope was ten yards ahead, in front of the company and he was lifting up his voice:

‘ When we lay where Budmouth Beach is,
Oh, the girls were fresh as peaches,
With their tall and tossing figures and
their eyes of blue and brown! ’

Harris tried to respond. It was a good quick-step tune, but you could not march to it in this filthy mud. It was no good trying to make men sing who had marched eighteen hours on an empty stomach. None of them would sing, not if an angel of the Lord came down.

Young Mr. Stanhope’s voice quavered away into silence. A pretty fool he looked, singing like that all by himself, trying to make believe that this was a bleeding picnic.

‘ Here’s Benevente, men. No more marching today.’

Rifleman Harris peered ahead. They were entering a sprawling silent town, scarcely more than a big village.

From the main street they turned left and, at a word of command, began to go forward in file up a narrow path. Little Johnson, who had been whining at his side for the last half-hour, broke out cursing again, for the path was steep, and where the hell were they going to, anyway?

Harris looked up. A great stone arch yawned upon them suddenly and the rough stone paving on the farther side of it seemed strangely hard to the feet after the soft mud. Before him was a wide courtyard, surrounded on all sides by high stone walls pierced with narrow windows.

‘ Fall out! ’

The blessed word had come at last. Harris moved forward with a bunch of others and followed his corporal towards a large door at which an old man in some sort of livery was standing. His face looked white and scared.

'Not going to eat you,' said Harris, and pushed past into the building.

He climbed with his comrades some wooden stairs and entered a wide room. It was full of spindly furniture and chairs with stuffed bottoms and on the walls hung huge strips of cloth woven into patterns. Someone had lit the remains of a candle standing on the mantelpiece, and figures of men and horses stirred as the tapestries billowed in the draught. But the room, for all its fine furnishings, was cold.

'Belongs to a duchess, this place,' said someone.

'Hell to the duchess,' shouted little Johnson. 'Where are the bleeding rations?'

There was a loud splintering and cracking. One of the painted doors in the room fell forward as a couple of men beat it in with their rifle butts. Someone else was sawing at the wood with a bayonet. Harris, throwing down his knapsack, went forward to lend a hand, for a fire they must have or die of cold.

He helped to break up the door and the wood lighted easily. It was painted with an elaborate design of Cupids. The paint made it burn well and what did it matter if it overflowed beyond the hearth? The floor was of marble, and anyway the Frenchies would probably burn the whole place down when they came along.

Harris, seated cross-legged in front of the fire, saw that the men were tearing down the tapestries. Corporal Young had a bit of one of them wound round his shoulders. He was shaking, being subject to the ague. On the tapestry was a fainting deer with an arrow sticking from its rump and the deer shook and trembled with the shivering of the man beneath it, so that it looked almost alive.

Why was there nothing to eat? Harris opened his pouch, pulled out a leaden ball, slipped it into his mouth and began to suck. A voice from somewhere outside was shouting roughly.

‘ Fall in again in four hours! ’

‘ Hell,’ thought Rifleman Harris.

He pulled a corner of the nearest tapestry towards him, rolled himself up in it and went to sleep.

§ 6

The room, lit only by two small candelabra on the mantelpiece, was sombre despite the richness of the carpet and the blue damask which covered the walls. But Marie Walewska was in no mood to brighten it. She had been sitting for more than an hour beside the fire on the hearth.

Fouché had sent her a message, begging her to receive him in great secrecy at midnight upon an affair touching the Emperor’s personal safety, and these last words, in a note written in his own hand, had led her to leave Pauline Borghese’s charade party an hour earlier than was either polite or circumspect. With that note filling her thoughts, she had been unable to endure a moment longer the discreet attentions of the half-dozen officers of the Paris garrison who had contrived for one reason or other not to serve in Spain, or to watch Pauline, as nearly naked as she dared to be, enact the part of Daphne pursued by an extremely young and handsome Apollo. So she had pleaded one of her headaches and gone quickly away in her chair through streets washed by a thin rain, which had not ceased to fall now for two days, till she had reached the Rue d’Houssaye, a full hour before her appointment with the Minister of Police. There she had dismissed

Marysia and sat down before the fire to wait for her visitor, having first assured herself that Felix Marbot was still on duty.

What could threaten the Emperor in the midst of twenty thousand of his Guard? His brother was King again in Madrid; the remnants of the Spanish army were running in all directions; the English were surrounded, perhaps even now cut to pieces or marching as unarmed prisoners through the passes of the Pyrenees. What, then, was this affair that touched his personal safety? And why did Fouché wish to consult her? Was it a device to commend himself as vigilant and all-providing? Or would he return, perhaps, to the suggestion he had made to her that day in early summer when he had talked of the Emperor's need of an heir and of a wife to steady him?

Surely Fouché must know that the infamous trick he had played on her in this very house made it impossible for her to receive him as a friend? How could he face her again after trying to ruin her with Napoleon by such common means? Or was his visit a sequel to the strange alliance which was now the theme of Paris? Fouché had been received by Talleyrand. The two men publicly flaunted an understanding. She remembered how the Emperor counted on their rivalry to neutralise any mischief they might severally entertain, but now the suspicion she had formed that there might be something afoot between them had been publicly confirmed.

She looked up from the fire.

Fouché was in the doorway in a plain brown coat, making his awkward bow.

Who had admitted him?

He straightened himself and came forward into the room as she rose from her chair.

'I would not allow your servants to announce me, madam,' he said.

'But they had orders to do so,' she protested indignantly. 'How many of my servants are in your employment, Monsieur Fouché?'

He stood unflinching, looking at her gravely.

'My men are here to ensure the safety of His Imperial Majesty. In every house frequented by the Emperor in Paris there are always those whose duty it is to keep watch over his person.'

'Your spies have other duties,' she retorted, 'as I have good reason to remember.'

Fouché gave no sign that he understood her reference. He still stood, quiet and collected, two paces away from her. But it was no use losing her temper.

She pointed to a chair.

'Sit down, won't you?' she said formally.

'Madam,' he said, 'I am not surprised that you should feel bitter against me. But my conscience authorises me to use any means, however much I dislike them, to forward what I consider to be the Emperor's interests.'

She stared at the pinched lips, almost prim in their rectitude, from which this amazing apology had fallen.

'You will excuse me if I fail to see how the Emperor's interests were to be served by your arranging for me to be locked into my room with Monsieur Marbot.'

'The intention, I think, was obvious,' responded Fouché. 'I had previously discussed with you a subject very near to the hearts of all his Majesty's subjects. I gave you certain advice. You did not see fit to take it. I still feel that a marriage between yourself and the Emperor would be an admirable solution of our present difficulties, but I see only danger for the Emperor in an irregular union from

which his country can derive no possible benefit and which needlessly complicates his dealings with a foreign Government.'

'This is frankness indeed!'

'I act for the Emperor. I care only for his welfare. That, I think, is a bond between us, and I hope it will be strong enough to enable you to overlook the past and help me to protect him from a serious danger which threatens him.'

She gripped the arms of her chair. She had no measure for this man. He was equally fantastic, whether false or true. Was he, as he claimed, driven by a devotion so single-minded as to be indifferent to fair dealing and shameless in confession? Or was he contriving some intricate treachery for purposes of his own?

'Madam,' he went on, 'I have discovered a secret which should be communicated to His Majesty without delay. I should perhaps say that the Emperor before leaving for Spain instructed me, through Marshal Duroc, to watch Monsieur de Talleyrand. It seems that his conduct at Erfurt had given rise to certain suspicions.'

Fouché paused.

'Yes,' she prompted.

'You have doubtless heard that the Prince of Benevento did me the honour to invite me to his reception yesterday?'

She nodded. Fouché had again stopped speaking. The tip of his tongue moved between his thin lips. He leaned a little forward, spreading out his hands.

'Talleyrand, like many others in France, madam, and to be frank with you, myself included, has serious misgivings as to the fate of the Empire in certain circumstances. Should anything serious happen to

His Majesty in the field——'

'You have already spoken to me of that,' she interrupted sharply.

'Talleyrand,' Fouché continued calmly, 'has convinced himself that the chances of the Emperor returning safely from Spain are remote and he has seen fit to take certain steps to ensure the succession. To that end'—Fouché was speaking slowly, underlining each word as it came so that there should be no possibility of her missing its implication—'to that end, madam, he has, I find, for some months past been in close communication with their Majesties the King and Queen of Naples.'

'Go on, Monsieur Fouché.'

'Talleyrand has written a letter in his own hand urging Murat to be ready, on receipt of a code message, to ride post to Paris. I suggest to you that this letter should not be permitted to reach its destination and that steps should be taken to ensure that it be diverted to the Emperor as soon as possible. His Majesty will then be able to take such further measures as may be necessary.'

She shifted her hands from the arms of her chair.

'Why do you make this suggestion to me? You should communicate with the Emperor himself.'

'My position in this affair is both painful and ambiguous. As a loyal servant of His Majesty I felt it essential to know exactly how far Talleyrand was prepared to go. To do so I have been obliged to seem a consenting party to his design, and I cannot openly betray a man who believes me to be his confederate. On the other hand, my motives must be clearly understood by someone who is in the confidence of His Majesty and whose testimony will be accepted without question.'

‘The word of the Emperor’s Minister should suffice. What need is there of further testimony?’

‘I have mentioned that there is a letter, madam. It is a treasonable letter, and I regret to say that the signature of the Emperor’s Minister stands, with that of Talleyrand, at the foot of it. I should be sorry if this proof of my zeal in the cause of His Majesty were wrongly interpreted.’

She stared at him incredulously.

‘You signed the letter?’

‘There was nothing else I could do.’

‘And you wish now to denounce the man whose confidence you obtained by signing it?’

‘That is the position.’

‘Must the Emperor’s welfare be secured by such means?’

‘By any and every means that may be necessary.’

‘The letter has been despatched?’

‘It is at the moment still in my possession.’

‘Then, if I must be your messenger, you may give it to me now.’

‘That, again, is impossible, madam. Until the Emperor has had an opportunity of dealing with this matter in his own way, it is essential that I should retain the confidence of Talleyrand. The utmost I can do, therefore, is to afford you the opportunity of diverting this letter into the Emperor’s hands. The letter is sealed. The wax bears the impression of an eagle with a thunderbolt in its claws. I shall entrust it to the post within an hour and the courier for Naples leaves the Porte d’Italie at midday tomorrow.’

‘You propose that I should intercept it?’

‘You have an excellent friend in Monsieur Lavalette, the Director General of Posts. It should not be difficult for him at a hint from you to have the letter

removed from the post-bag. It could then be taken direct to His Majesty in Spain by your own personal courier.'

She rose from her chair, and, walking to the window, drew aside the heavy curtain. The rain had ceased and the moonlight lay on the paving stones like a soft film. She wanted time to think, out of range of the eyes which never looked at her and yet seemed never to miss anything she did. She despaired of ever understanding the conduct or intentions of this man, but he had said that the Emperor was in danger and that secret arrangements were being made to provide him with a successor. If treason could go so far, it might be driven farther. She came back to the fireplace.

'I will see Monsieur Lavalette at once,' she said.

Fouché had risen. There was dismissal in her voice and with a pinched smile he accepted it, bowing over her hand. His lips were dry as they touched her fingers.

'I felt I could count on you, madam,' he said.

Scarcely waiting for the door to close behind him, she turned to the bell-rope, and, when the footman appeared at the door, she was writing at the mahogany desk in the corner.

'Ask Monsieur Marbot to come at once,' she said.

§ 7

The pistol-shot sounded sharp and clear, but Rifleman Harris did not even turn his head. His full attention was concentrated on not straggling from the ranks. Young Mr. Stanhope had said that the Ninety-fifth must set an example. Besides, one knew what happened to stragglers.

Again that sound. He would remember it to his

dying day. They were marching now mixed up with the cavalry, and every time a horse foundered its rider put a bullet through its head. Those were Lord Paget's orders and the Hussars respected them.

Rifleman Harris watched one of them as he staggered from his fallen mount, still twitching in the mud. The man had thrown away his pistol, but kept his sabre and the spurs were still on his boots. Marching in spurs! But that was just like the cavalry.

Rifleman Harris plodded on.

'No straggling, men. No straggling!'

Young Mr. Stanhope would repeat those words in his sleep if ever he had any sleep again.

Rifleman Harris shivered. The rain that beat on their shoulders was cold. Perhaps it would turn to snow presently. He could not remember what day it was, but anyhow this was the New Year. He had seen it in, doing a forced march over clotted roads in freezing darkness.

He missed the little cockney who was not there to whine at his side any more. Johnson had vanished at Villa Franca. None of them would ever forget that place. Rations for the whole army, enough for fourteen days, had been stored there, but, when they had eaten their fill, the General had ordered them to leave all that lovely food and drink behind. They must march as light as possible, and the stores would be burned so that the Frenchies should not have them. That had been too much, even for the Ninety-fifth. They had helped to loot the rations, and Harris still had a bit of salt pork tucked away in his cartridge pouch as a last reserve, hard now as one of the bullets which kept it company. He had taken it from a great barn-like place, looking like a school, with a blackboard at one

end of it chalked with figures and signs. Young Mr. Stanhope had struck him across the shoulders with the flat of his sword and cursed him back into the ranks.

After that the Ninety-fifth had struggled out of the town in some sort of order, and young Mr. Stanhope had come up and apologised, saying that he had not meant to strike Harris, who was a good soldier, and they had shaken hands. But that seemed days ago, and still they were marching and still the rain came down. They were in the mountains again, plodding through snow, often up to their knees. Heavy clouds hung about the mountain tops, and on each side of the track lay little heaps of men and women. Even the dead looked as though they were feeling the bitter cold.

I thought it had been day ;
And I stole from her away,
But it proved to be the light of the moon.

A heavy man in a red coat marched beside Rifleman Harris. The man's arm was round a woman. She wore a soldier's greatcoat, buttoned over her head, and from under it hung the edge of a ragged skirt covering but scantily two bare legs spattered with mud.

The man lurched heavily against Harris, causing him to break his step and stumble to his knees.

Rifleman Harris thrust his arm out, and the big soldier in red, falling with a crash, rolled with the woman to the side of the road.

'Keep it up! No straggling!'

Rifleman Harris staggered forward.

Something was crying thinly away to the left. The road had taken a slight bend and, on the ground, was a youngish woman with a face as white as the snow. The top part of her body was naked and a lusty child of about three months old lay between her clay-cold breasts.

'My God, these women! It really oughtn't to be allowed,' muttered Harris, and, as the thought came to him, young Mr. Stanhope stepped out of the ranks, tucked his drawn sword under his arm, picked up the child and threw it over his shoulder, so that its head hung down and the rain beat upon its little pink bottom upheld to the sky. Rifleman Harris hurried alongside.

'Give it to me, sir,' he said, 'you have enough to do keeping us together,' and his voice sounded strange in his ears.

The officer thrust the child, still wailing, into Harris's arms.

'No straggling, Harris,' he said. 'If you can't manage with the child, you must leave it behind.'

'Yes, sir,' answered Harris.

The child stopped crying suddenly and thrust a thumb between its gums.

'That won't last you long, sonny,' said Rifleman Harris.

Young Mr. Stanhope reappeared. He had in his hands the remains of a skirt and bodice.

'From the mother,' he said briefly. 'She doesn't need them now, poor soul.'

He took the baby from Harris, wrapped the skirt about it and handed it back. Harris, in the meantime, had opened the top buttons of his greatcoat. He thrust the baby feet first into the opening and held it thus with one hand, its little head, with a few dark wet wisps of hair, lying in the crook of his neck between shoulder and chin.

The child's body was very cold.

'We'll soon warm up, sonny,' said Harris, and was suddenly exercised about the lice in his shirt.

Groups of men and women, huddling by the side of the road, sat staring straight in front of them.

As good as dead they were and waiting for the Frenchies to get them. You couldn't march without boots and when your feet were all to pieces. God be thanked he had a sound pair of boots himself. That's what came of being a cobbler.

The clouds were dividing. Or were those the tops of mountains? You could never tell in this country, but the road seemed to be taking them into a sea of light. The clouds had indeed parted and it had stopped raining and the road was going down.

Again a reed-like wailing came to his ears. Rifleman Harris glanced down at the baby on his neck. It was sleeping and the cries were from elsewhere.

The road turned again sharply. A single dark figure lay upon the snow almost at his feet, as he swung round, and from there came the thin cries he had heard. The woman was lying still, but the child she had brought into the world was waving frog-like limbs in the snow, still attached to its dead mother.

Rifleman Harris turned his head. The road was going downhill rapidly. It would be warmer perhaps in the forest below.

Presently came the trees: oaks, chestnuts and, lower still, elders and poplars. The country would be fine in summer. The bare twisted boughs of a wild apple gave an English touch to the field on his right hand, but the strange grey trees on the left must be olives.

Further on was a stream and cross-roads beyond it. The stream was spanned by a stone bridge and beside it a small knot of horsemen, one of them a little in advance of the rest, stood waiting. The foremost man wore a cocked hat and beneath it his face was impassive, the mouth drawn in a tight line. From his

shoulders a long cloak hung down over his horse's flanks.

Beyond the horsemen, lining the side of the road, stood a number of men on parade.

At the sight of the man on the horse Rifleman Harris instinctively set his shoulders. That was Sir John Moore. It was their General who sat, motionless, watching the men as they staggered past.

Who were the men on parade beyond the General? And why was the big sergeant shouting at those who passed and what was he saying?

Harris took another look at the line of men. What was the matter with them all? Not one was fit to stand. One of them, an empty sleeve dangling, was holding his right arm bound in a blood-soaked bandage torn from his shirt; another was hideously cut about the shoulder; half a dozen stared ahead of them in misery from faces gashed and bleeding; the mouth of the man at the end of the line was oddly large and red.

With no kind of shock Harris recognised little Johnson whom they had left behind at Villa Franca.

The big sergeant of the Thirty-second Foot who stood beside them, his red coat still comparatively clean, shouted continuously at the troops as they passed.

'These men are paraded, by order of the Commander-in-Chief, to warn all ranks of the consequences of drunkenness and desertion. They were caught by the French cavalry this morning, having failed to maintain their places in the ranks. These men are paraded . . .'

Rifleman Harris stumbled forward down the road. The parade-ground voice of the sergeant grew fainter with each repetition.

The child, firmly buttoned into his coat, stirred and whimpered.

§ 8

‘That will do,’ said Lavalette at last.

Felix, released from inspection, stood at ease, thankful to have at last been passed by the Director General of Posts.

Lavelette rose from the table.

‘Now we can start,’ he said.

Felix followed him down the room. All ways led in the end to the Emperor and he was going now, not with an ordinary message, such as he had carried so often, but with a despatch to be delivered to the Emperor in the field. Treason was intended towards His Majesty, and it was a matter of life and death that the sealed paper, to be removed that morning by Monsieur Lavalette from the mails, should reach the Emperor as soon as possible wherever he might be, together with the short covering note from Walewska which he carried in the breast-pocket of his coat.

Lavalette had decided in his wisdom that the despatch should not be carried by a page of the Imperial household in scarlet and gold, but by someone less conspicuous and better able to account for his anxiety to reach the Spanish frontier in the shortest possible time. So Felix, fulfilling one at least of his ambitions, had achieved a soldier’s uniform, a worn tunic of green with gilt plastrons on the chest, distinctly faded. The red dolman, hanging from his left shoulder, was also far from new, and the red-and-green plume in his shako had wilted from long service. He had paraded at first in his new breeches, but had been ordered to change them, and now he wore the pair in which he had ridden with Walewska from Poland to France. He was to pass for a young officer, a trifle war-worn;

his papers announced him to be Adrien Longchamps of the Third Hussars, forming part of the cavalry attached to Marshal Ney's Sixth Corps, now under the direct command of the Emperor and understood to be hot in pursuit of the English somewhere between Benevente and Astorga.

Lavalette had reached the door. Felix, from force of habit, hastened in front of him to throw it open, but was harshly checked from the rear.

'Hitch up your sabre, Lieutenant!'

Lavalette rapped on the door, which was opened from the other side by the usher. He passed to the staircase and Felix, with a jingle of spurs, clattered down the steps of the Hôtel des Postes. Outside was a post-chaise, high-wheeled, with two horses, the leader ridden by a postilion. Leather bags, with conspicuous red seals, were being thrown into the chaise under the eyes of a sergeant who was checking them against a list held in his hand. The courier, a tough little man, was in the chaise and shouting for a hot brick to warm the carriage.

The sergeant in charge, on seeing Lavalette, gave a scarcely perceptible sidelong movement of the head, and the Director General entered a second chaise standing behind the first. Felix took the seat beside him. The fellow on the box evidently had his orders and they drove off at once.

'The bags will be searched at the barrier,' said Lavalette. 'Your horse will be waiting for you there.'

Lavalette sat back. Felix stared out of the window of the chaise at the wet streets. The chaise rolled and bumped over the uneven paving.

The figure at his side turned.

'Let me repeat. You are an officer rejoining your unit on recovering from wounds. Talk as little as

possible, but make no mystery about yourself. Above all, ride. Ride like the devil.'

'Yes, sir,' said Felix.

The chaise turned left abruptly and a moment later stopped with a screeching of its iron-shod wheels.

'Longchamps!'

Felix started to attention.

'Get out! Wait behind the guard-room.'

Felix jumped to the ground. The chaise had brought them to the barrier of the Porte d'Italie. An open fire was burning in the street, which here broadened into a square, and round it stood the reliefs of the Guard. They paid no attention to Lavalette, Felix noticed, but that was not surprising. Lavalette was not in uniform. He strode into the guard-house and Felix, mindful of his instructions, took cover behind it. There he found a groom with his horse, a good beast, though a trifle short in the shoulder, which would mean uneasy riding in the first stage.

'Here is the letter. See the wax, an eagle with the thunderbolt in its claws.'

The voice came from a window immediately behind him in the back wall of the guard house.

There came a crackle of paper, the dull thump of a heavy stamp and a moment later the window was thrust wide and the face of Lavalette appeared in the opening.

'All clear?'

Felix shot a glance up and down the road.

'All clear it is, sir.'

Beyond him, five yards away, loomed the heavy arch of the gate. A thin rain drove down. The horse beside him shivered suddenly and struck one hoof petulantly against a stone. Then the voice of Lavalette came once more sharply from the window.

'Here you are. Be off with you, and good luck.'

A folded paper twice sealed, once with wax which was not yet cold, was thrust at him. Felix crammed it into the breast pocket of his tunic, swung himself into the saddle and, pressing the eager horse with his knees, was carried in a bound through the gate.

§ 9

The thin rain made tiny runnels on the thick glass. Fouché rose from his desk and, walking to the window, leaned against the wall where the heavy curtain was looped back. He looked through the blurred pane upon the Seine and the long line of the Louvre beyond. There was no one to be seen, for it was the hour when Paris fed and the quays by the river were left to the rain and to the sparrows, except for a barge, deep in the water with its cargo of stone, which was being towed slowly against the stream by a double team of Normandy geldings.

Fouché's gaze rested a moment on the steaming flanks of the horses and on the little man who flourished a small whip and flicked at them with an irritating persistence.

Had he acted, perhaps, too soon? Talleyrand would want to know exactly what he had done about sending that letter to Murat, and, if the Emperor delayed his return, there would be an interval during which awkward questions might be expected. But the interval would be short. The Emperor was easily frightened by events in Paris. Fouché had a swift vision of his Imperial master receiving the letter in some improvised billet in Spain, thrusting aside his maps and calling for an escort. Then and there he

would ride for the frontier, for his work in Spain was as good as finished.

Or was that, in fact, the position? Might not the Emperor be too deeply involved to withdraw quite so easily. Could he yet leave what remained of the campaign to Ney and Soult and the rest of them? There had been no news from Spain for several days. The visual telegraph was a useful invention, but the mist and fog so constantly interfered with its working that news was provokingly intermittent.

Fouché pressed his forehead against the pane. Should he have waited for confirmation of the Emperor's successes before going to Walewska? No, he could hardly have waited; not with the whole of Paris buzzing with the news of his dramatic reconciliation with Talleyrand. He had been driven to act quickly, and now, whatever happened, he was reasonably secure. If the Emperor returned, Walewska would bear witness to his loyalty. If the Emperor did not return, Walewska would cease to count, and, if she should prove troublesome and seek to destroy his credit with Talleyrand, she could, if necessary, be silenced. There was no evidence that he had been false to Talleyrand except for her bare word and that of her simple admirer, the Director General of Posts. It would be their word against his, and they would be telling a story so fantastic that few would believe it. For what was more unlikely than that he should have gone to Walewska and put himself entirely in her hands, a woman whose connection with the Emperor he had sought to destroy? Talleyrand, of course, would have his doubts, but a wise man doubted the whole world and the Minister of Police was too useful a person to be destroyed on a mere suspicion.

All this assumed that the Emperor would not return. . . . But the Emperor would come back and that would

be the end of Talleyrand. It could not be otherwise.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Fouché, swinging round, saw that Marchand was bowing in the middle of the carpet. He held a dripping hat in his hand and from his arm dangled a wet cloak.

'I beg your pardon, Excellency, for not being able to get here sooner,' he began.

Fouché cut him short with a gesture.

'Your report,' he said.

'I have to report, sir, that Monsieur Lavalette drove this morning to the Porte d'Italie with a young Hussar officer just as the mails for Italy were starting. Five minutes later the officer rode off. He took the road to Orléans.'

'His name?'

'His papers declared him to be Adrien Longchamps, a lieutenant of the Third Hussars.'

Marchand paused.

'Yes?' prompted Fouché.

'The name of Adrien Longchamps, Excellency, appeared in a casualty list last week, as having been severely wounded at the battle of Tudela. Moreover, I saw this young officer as he rode through the gate, and he bore a striking resemblance to Felix Marbot in the service of Countess Walewska.'

Fouché nodded.

'Thank you, Marchand. That is all I wanted to know.'

Walewska had acted promptly. Marbot would ride night and day, and the Emperor might be expected in Paris before Talleyrand could begin to conjecture that an important letter had somehow gone astray.

§ 10

‘ No falling out in the Guard! ’

Sergeant Poireau had said those words, how long ago? How much longer would he be able to remember them? There was only one thing that prevailed against the grey murk in which he lived, a shooting agony that streaked through him from heel to head at every other step he took.

Guardsman Laval shifted his musket to the other shoulder. He must not let it fall. That would be the end.

His belly, which had remained quiescent, began to gnaw again, till it almost drowned the pain in his foot. There was still snow on the ground and the road was never flat. On and after the English. But how could a man walk in snow with a naked foot sticking from a boot which had fallen to pieces?

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

‘ Christ, let go,’ he muttered.

‘ Give me that,’ insisted the voice.

It was the voice of his friend Jean, who was trying to take his musket. The wart on Jean’s face had turned blue, but his black moustache was white. It must have turned white in the night. But, of course, it was white with snow. Jean was going to carry his musket for him.

‘ No, I can manage it,’ said Laval, but he spoke only just above a whisper and somehow Jean was carrying the musket. Not that it made much difference. The road was too steep. No man could march up the side of a house.

Where was the Emperor? Lost in the snow, like the rest of them? Or was that the Emperor he heard, singing in that queer voice, cracked and tuneless?

Laval looked about him. Why was he kneeling in the snow? In front of him a column of men in blue and white with dark bearskins on their heads stumbled past him over the white spaces. That was his regiment. That was the Old Guard. But no man could march on his knees, and suddenly he knew that he would never get to his feet again. Jean, it seemed, was beside him. Jean had the two muskets, but one of them had fallen in the snow. Jean also was on his knees.

Laval set his sound foot in the snow and groped for his musket. Leaning heavily upon it, he tried to struggle up, but, as his right foot touched the ground, a blinding flame of agony shot up his body. He staggered, swayed and fell beside his friend.

How long he lay there he did not know. His eyes were open. He was not asleep. He could see things. The road in front wound upwards and there were little trees here and there in the fields beside it. They were heavy with white blossom. Orchards. An apple orchard in spring. There were people moving through it, three figures, two women and a man, dark against the white blossom.

Was that woman with the long thin knife coming to cut the blossom from the trees?

He moved to see better what they were doing and his mind came back. This was no orchard, but a mountain in Spain, and those trees were burdened with snow and the dark figures were Spanish peasants. They were coming to finish him.

The woman with the knife was only fifty yards away. They would finish him, but not too quickly, and the column of blue and white was now nowhere to be seen. They did dreadful things to you with their knives, and there was nothing left but the snow-bound country and

the trees and Jean lying at his feet.

He bent down and touched Jean. He was stiff and hard as a board. Jean was dead. He would soon be lying beside his friend; not like Jean, cold and peaceful, but a squirming horror, when the knife had done its work. A filthy man was beside the woman and they were running towards him across the snow.

Laval seized his musket barrel with both hands and dragged himself to his feet. His teeth chattered as he grasped the steel of the muzzle. Then he threw all his weight on the left foot. The right one was almost useless, but it would serve his turn.

His big toe fumbled with the trigger and the sudden outcry of the running peasants was lost in the crash of the exploding gun.

§ 11

‘Your lack of curiosity, my dear Casimir, is inhuman. Everyone is asking me, or would ask me if they dared, why I have made peace as publicly as possible with Fouché. But you haven’t yet so much as mentioned the matter.’

Talleyrand settled himself comfortably back in his corner of the carriage and looked sidelong at Montrond with a smile.

Montrond closed his eyes.

‘I know better, Charles, than to be inquisitive. Things you want me to know you tell me without being asked, and, if I ask you things which you do not want me to know, you lie to me like an angel.’

‘How well you know me! You may even have guessed that I was about to ask you for something.’

Montrond opened his eyes and looked quizzically at his friend.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘what is it?’

‘I want you to keep your eyes open, and, if you see a chance tonight of my having a word with Fouché privately, let me know.’

‘I’ve done strange things for you in my time, but none stranger than this? What have you to do with that filthy fellow?’

‘Fouché is Minister of Police.’

‘Why should you want to stand well with him?’

‘It can do no harm. Can it, Casimir?’

Montrond closed his eyes again.

‘I am the most accommodating of friends and never anxious to know more than is good for me. But I should like a few crumbs to throw to the gossips. They talk of nothing else in the faubourg, and I have no doubt that the news is a hot topic in the drawing-rooms of Twickenham and Hanover.’

‘No doubt.’

Talleyrand was pleased with the sound of his own voice. Its tone was dry and cool, a tone which gave nothing away.

‘Fouché,’ he continued, ‘will perhaps be useful to us. That is all I can say at the moment.’

The carriage wheeled to the right and Talleyrand swung for a moment against Montrond’s shoulder as it turned into the drive of the Princess de Vaudemont’s house at Suresnes.

Together they climbed the broad steps, a lackey holding an umbrella above their heads to protect them from the rain. Thence they passed through long glass doors to find themselves, a moment later, bowing over the hand, first of the Princess herself, and then of Letizia Bonaparte, with whom Talleyrand fell at once into easy talk.

A handsome woman, he reflected, and, for a woman who had borne thirteen children, eight of whom, the

Emperor included, were still alive, she had a very remarkable figure.

‘His Majesty’s success in Spain is an event highly gratifying to us all, madam,’ he said, concluding his courtesies.

‘Provided it lasts,’ she answered in her heavy Corsican accent, and gave him a keen look. But he did not quail. The phrase was too familiar.

‘I have no reason whatever to doubt it,’ he answered gravely and passed on.

His relations with Letizia had never passed the formal stage, but there was no doubt in his mind that she saw through men and things. Most men needed a clear conscience to meet this sibylline creature with an easy mind. Yet his heart was light within him as he limped quietly away.

‘There is an orangery,’ whispered Montrond in his ear, ‘with tropical birds among the flowers. And among the birds you will find a mangy kite.’

‘Who else is here tonight?’ demanded Talleyrand, tucking his hand in his friend’s arm and moving slowly in the direction indicated.

‘I have seen the Walewska.’

‘Better she should not see me. I should be sorry to spoil her evening.’

‘She is safe in the little drawing-room.’

Montrond pulled aside a curtain as he spoke. A breath of air, hotter even than that in the ballroom which he was leaving and sickly with the smell of flowers, struck Talleyrand in the face. Gently he disengaged his arm from that of Montrond and went forward alone into a dimly lighted place where orange trees in tubs and plants in earthenware jars spread themselves in the humid atmosphere. A strange purple flower of which he did not know the name

brushed his cheek, and, just above it, a macaw, in plumage of scarlet and grey, swung from a perch to which it was attached by a gilded chain.

‘Over there, I think’

Talleyrand, turning slightly, found Fouché at his elbow. He was pointing to two chairs set in an alcove, flanked by two orange trees which stood in their tubs like fat sentinels. The fruit hanging from their boughs was small, wrinkled and green.

Talleyrand sat and looked about him. Fouché, he noted, evidently preferred to be unobserved. His head and the upper part of his body were in deep shadow; only the white silk breeches, wrinkled at the knee above white silk stockings, were thrust into the half light of the orangery.

‘You wished to see me,’ came his voice from the shadows.

‘First as to action taken. Our letter has left for Naples?’

‘Three days ago, by the ordinary post. I thought it would be safer so.’

‘The Moniteur admits this afternoon that the English are not surrounded. They are marching back to the coast. They will escape to their ships, and the English, you know, have a proverb. I heard it often when I was an exile in London: he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day. It was wise of the Emperor to decide that he must surround and annihilate the only field army which they possessed. Unfortunately, Fouché, he has not succeeded.’

Talleyrand paused. Surely it was time for his partner to say something?

‘But he is driving the English from Spain,’ Fouché observed at last. ‘That saves him for the moment.’

‘Saves him for what? Spain has yet to be con-

quered and the condition of our army is appalling. I have had frightful accounts.'

'There has been, I understand, a great deal of straggling and desertion.'

'Certainly a great deal of straggling,' repeated Talleyrand dryly, 'and I think we know what happens to the stragglers. You describe the situation with more than your usual moderation, Fouché. I am credibly informed that there have been many suicides, even among the Guard. The Emperor is driving his troops too hard. The weather is indescribable; the army is short of food; there is a great deal of sickness. He is losing the confidence of his men and we must be ready to act at a moment's notice.'

He paused.

'I'm thinking not only of the position in Spain,' he added. 'De Nesselrode saw me this afternoon and, half an hour afterwards, I had a word from Metternich. Alexander will remain neutral at all costs, not only so far as Spain is concerned but when Austria moves, and Austria will move just as soon as she can mobilise. She will have a hundred thousand men in the field by the beginning of March.'

As he finished a loud scream, harsh and high, rang through the orangery. Fouché started nervously.

'Only the macaw,' murmured Talleyrand with a smile.

He broke off. A tall figure in a white dress fluttered for a moment into his field of vision and was lost behind an exotic branch.

'You think we should ask Murat to come at once,' said Fouché slowly.

'We cannot summon him till he has received our letter,' said Talleyrand. 'Allow time for it to reach him. Then, I think, we should at once send him the

code word, Rubicon, by visual telegraph.'

His eyes, as he spoke, were seeking the tall figure in white which had passed from view.

Surely that was Letizia Bonaparte.

§ 12

The carriage was moving fast. Fouché, seated alone, stared at the pattern of the corded silk covering the back of the opposite seat.

So the English had escaped and Austria was moving. But the letter which should have been well on its way to Murat was being carried fast to the Emperor and it was beginning to look as though the Emperor had failed.

Never be slow to admit an error and be swift to correct it. Fouché owned frankly to himself that he had blundered. If that letter reached army headquarters in Spain, he would never be able to deny his double-dealing and there would be an end of his credit with Talleyrand and his mincing diplomats who would shape the interregnum that must follow the Emperor's passing.

There was only one issue from the corner into which he had been driven. The letter must be recovered. It should have gone to Murat, but had been misdirected to Napoleon. Now it must be retrieved. Better, this time perhaps, that it should vanish altogether.

Fouché leaned forward and let down the window of the carriage. The sky was clearing already. He could see stars. Visibility tomorrow would be excellent if the night held its promise.

Twenty minutes later he was seated at his desk in his library in the Hôtel de Juigné. He rang the bell and pulled a sheet of paper towards him.

‘ You rang, Excellency? ’ came the voice of Tisset.

‘ I want an urgent message sent by visual telegraph to Bayonne as soon as it is light.’

Fouché did not look up from the sheet on which he was busy writing.

‘ Certainly, Excellency.’

‘ Are Barat and Maurice to be trusted? ’

‘ They are most reliable men, Excellency.’

‘ Fetch me the cipher book.’

‘ Shall I cipher the message, Excellency? ’

Fouché looked at Tisset a moment and slowly shook his head.

‘ No thank you, Tisset. I shall cipher it myself.

CHAPTER XIV

§ I

THE postilion, crouching like a jockey on the back of his horse, pointed with his whip.

‘Blois,’ he said.

Felix drew out his watch. It was half-past seven and a fine clear dawn had broken. He had left the rain behind him between Etampes and Orleans and his riding-cloak was still dry from the fire of the last relay post but one. He had slept but three hours since leaving Paris. Three hours too much, when riding on the Emperor’s service, his brother Marcellin would have said; but the sleep had refreshed him and he was good, he felt, for another twelve in the saddle.

So this was Blois.

The pale winter sunshine fell on lines of poplar trees, interspersed here and there with willows. The Loire was flowing lazily a few hundred yards to the right. From the fine mist in front of him rose the towers of the Castle. He would drink a mug of hot wine while they changed horses.

‘Where is the relay post?’ he asked over his shoulder of the postilion, who had fallen half a length behind.

‘At the Austerlitz,’ replied the man.

Felix drew his horse to the side and motioned the postilion to lead. They were now in the town and the

place was cumbered with carts. A broad street, ending in the market-place, was loud with cries and the creaking of wheels. Felix saw a sign hanging from the wall of a house: the Emperor on his white horse, with someone handing him a standard. That must be the inn for the relay.

'In ten minutes,' said Felix to the ostler, who ran to meet him.

The man looked doubtful.

'Despatches,' said Felix abruptly.

The ostler touched his forehead and, within the stipulated time, Felix, warmed with his mug of wine and crunching a crust of bread, rode out again by the southern road to Tours.

§ 2

It was early morning and the mists still lay on the fields. Jean Michaud blew upon his hands as he approached the telegraph. Marius, late as usual, would ask what use it was to go on duty at half-past seven in the morning when it was impossible to see. Usually they had to sit by the fire in their hut for at least an hour, waiting for the mists to clear. But orders were orders and, not three weeks ago, the inspector from Paris had caught them unawares. The unpleasant incident was still fresh and vivid. 'If this happens again, it's back to the navy you'll go'—that's what the inspector had said, and Jean had no desire to go back to the navy. The very thought of the stinking fo'castle, the heaving decks, the broadsides of the English and their blood-curdling yells as they boarded with cutlasses turned him cold at nights and Marius felt the same. Neither of them had any wish to be a sailor of the Emperor, not after Trafalgar. To

be in charge of the telegraph at Bayonne was more to their liking. The work in summer was not unpleasant, though there was more to do when the air was clear, and in winter, when it was dark by five, the hours were short.

Jean looked up at the telegraph and, as he looked, his morning irritation deepened. For the mist was clearing and the great white-painted arms, thrust upwards into the clear air, stood mute and ready. It might almost be a summer morning.

'Clear at last,' came the voice of Marius at his side. Jean stared resentfully at his mate, who was leaning against one of the uprights and stretching sleepily.

'If you went to bed alone more often,' he said sourly, 'you'd be a bit more lively in the morning.'

Marius laughed.

'There are better times to be lively,' he said.

Jean did not answer. He was too angry to speak. Let Marius be careful. One of these days the inspector would catch him, and he would find himself on ship-board again, trying to break the English blockade and eating biscuits with weevils.

Marius still leaned against the upright. His eyes were fixed on the large brass telescope trained landwards in accordance with orders. One of them must always keep a look-out on the next station where ex-petty officer Grosjean was watching from the top of his wooden tower fifteen miles away across the green Landes in the middle of the pine forest.

Jean moved away and threw some more wood on the fire, which crackled pleasantly, for the sticks were dry. No wet wood was allowed. Wet wood gave off smoke and made it difficult to read the signals. He entered a rough hut, of which the door stood open, lacking a hinge.

'I must mend it tomorrow,' was his thought, as it

had been a dozen times a day for a fortnight past.

Beneath an old sack was a bottle. A mouthful of wine would not do him any harm. It kept the cold out. Not that it was really cold, for now the sun was up and it would soon be quite warm. His hand groped beneath the sack and had gripped the neck of the bottle when a call came from Marius.

'Message from Grosjean. Come quickly and take it. Priority.'

Jean hurried from the hut. The word 'priority' aroused his latent sense of discipline. He picked up the pad and pencil lying on the shelf by the hut door.

Marius was standing by the telegraph, staring through the eye-piece of the telescope. Jean looked a moment over his shoulder as he sat down beside him. Far away in the clear morning air the white arms of Grosjean's semaphore were moving.

Marius began to dictate slowly.

'B-Q-Z-K-L-N-G.'

'Curse it,' muttered Jean, as he set down the letters, 'it's a cipher message.'

That meant having to repeat.

§ 3

Quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum.

The line jingled in Felix's head, keeping time to the hoof-beats. He was now so tired that, once a jingle started, it continued of itself. This one called fitfully to mind the old Abbé Sorèze, who had taught him Latin before he became a servant of the Emperor. The abbé had often discoursed at length upon Virgil's horse and the rhythm of its galloping.

But all that seemed a lifetime ago.

It was on the recommendation of the postmaster

of the inn at Tours that he had abandoned the Poitiers-Angoulême road for the longer route through Lussac, Confolens and Montron to Périgueux. The postmaster had said that the road was more practicable and the relays in better condition, and so far the going had been very fair, though the hills, which turned out to be unexpectedly steep, were annoyingly frequent.

The weather had turned foul again after Lussac, and the hoof-beats of his horse were muffled by dust turning rapidly into mud beneath the raindrops. Night was falling, though it was not yet six in the afternoon. The fire of adventure, which had flared so brightly when he had dashed with a clatter of hooves from the Porte d'Italie, was burning low. The saddle chafed his thigh, and the dolman, to which he was not yet accustomed, hung heavily on his shoulder.

'Here we are, sir. God help the beasts,' said the postilion.

Felix caught at the saddle to prevent himself from falling, as his horse turned of its own accord sharp left into the stable-yard at the end of the relay. There stood the same ostler in shirt sleeves and breeches, with the same piece of straw protruding from his lips, moving to hold the head of his sweating horse. Felix slipped from the saddle. How many such ostlers and such inn-yards had he seen since leaving Paris? For a moment the gable of the inn, from which the rain-water was beginning to spout untidily, wavered before his eyes.

'Supper and a bed for the Lieutenant,' said a voice in his ear.

The landlord, with a red face and a green apron, stood at his elbow, the sort of inn landlord one saw on the Paris stage. He would burst suddenly into a comic air, before ushering his lovers into the wrong bedrooms.

'Supper,' repeated the landlord, but Felix stopped him with a gesture.

'No time for that,' he said. 'Get me another horse. Despatches.'

He wished his voice had a deeper tone and that he could see more clearly.

The landlord touched his forehead.

'In five minutes, sir,' he said.

The landlord and the ostler and the postilion came suddenly into focus again. Felix smiled. The landlord smiled back.

'A glass of wine, sir?'

Felix nodded.

'And something to eat on the way,' suggested the landlord. 'My wife has the remains of a lark pie.'

Felix's mind went back to the warm day near Nantes when he had sat in the field by the poplars and watched Marie Walewska eating just such a pie, her eyes bright beneath her dark eyebrows and yellow hair.

'It's got to be double pay,' grumbled a new voice.

The postilion for the next stage was struggling into his coat with a sour expression on his face.

'Double it is,' said Felix, and took the wine cup which the landlord was offering.

'Drink it inside, sir?' the landlord suggested, but Felix shook his head. He feared the warmth and comfort of the fire.

The new horse was led out of the stable. Felix watched it being saddled, munching at the slab of pie which someone had thrust into his hand. He swayed a little as they helped him into the saddle.

The ostler looked up at him doubtfully, removed the straw from his mouth and seemed about to speak

as Felix gathered up the reins.

‘Get on with it, postilion,’ Felix snapped. ‘There’s half a Napoleon for you at the end if we make good time.’

They clattered out of the yard to the road again.

Waves of sleep broke over him as they fell into a long canter.

Quadrupedante putrem . . .

‘Hold up, sir.’

Felix became aware of a voice in his ear. The postilion was beside him and they were riding knee to knee. The man touched his shoulder. Felix threw back his head. Sleep had nearly mastered him.

Suddenly he remembered what Marcellin had told him once, how to prevent yourself from falling asleep on a horse. Get the postilion to sing to you.

‘Can you sing?’ demanded Felix abruptly.

‘Sing?’ echoed the postilion, with the aggrieved air of one who was past surprise. ‘I can sing for my supper,’ he growled.

‘Then sing, damn you,’ said Felix, ‘and go on singing.’

The postilion’s white teeth gleamed in the dusk as he threw back his head and sang:

‘Auprès de ma blonde,
Qu’il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Auprès de ma blonde,
Qu’il fait bon dormi.’

§ 4

The inn of the Flowering Basket was doing well and its proprietor, Gaston Barat, sitting in his postmaster’s office, had no cause for dissatisfaction, except, of course, the difficulty of getting gold. But that was no new

trouble. Gold had been hard to come by since '91, and, though there was much pleasure to be had from tucking banknotes away in the hole under the right-hand wall of the third cellar where Célimène could not come at them, this flimsy stuff was a poor substitute for the bright, round yellow pieces that he loved.

Nevertheless he had to thank the Revolution for much. It had made him a postmaster and given him for wife the daughter of a well-to-do farmer of taxes to whom he would never have dared to lift his eyes had he not thoroughly grasped the principle that all men were equal; only some were more artful than the rest.

There were times, of course, when he did not know whether to be entirely thankful for Célimène. She could still drive him to distraction, being the only woman who had ever fired his fancy, but she liked throwing his money about and made him pay for his pleasures, and it would never do to let her know that he had sources of revenue quite unsuspected of the world.

He looked through the dusty window of his private office to the street outside. It was less full than usual. Were the good times coming to an end? Barat sighed. The Grand Army could not be marching for ever through Bayonne, though it was to be hoped it would continue to do so for many a good month to come. Meantime, what with the soldiers posting to the wars and the casualties coming back, there had been a most satisfactory rise in prices, and there was still that contract for supplies of wine to the wounded to be liquidated.

The Emperor hated contractors. Barat hated them too. The dirty thieves were taking twenty per cent of his profits on all his deliveries. No wonder he was driven, in self-defence, to compensate himself for their exactions.

Barat flushed in wrathful memory of three kegs of brandy for Number Four Hospital. To make a decent profit he had found it necessary to be careless of the quality, and those kegs had happened by ill fortune to fall into the hands of General Thibault, who knew more than a mere consumer should of such matters. General Thibault, thank God, had moved on at last to Burgos. But not till he had threatened unmentionable things. He had even gone so far as to talk of a court-martial and a firing squad.

Barat smiled vindictively. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell the furious little man, who had rated him as though he had been a common thief before half the inn staff, that he was nevertheless of some account, and that no less a person than Joseph Fouché, Minister of Police, had a special interest in his welfare. But fortunately he had held his tongue. For no one in Bayonne, or indeed anywhere else, must know that the city postmaster, landlord of the best inn, was a trusted agent of the Minister. The Minister himself had impressed that very firmly upon him during their talk together in the Minister's fine house in Paris.

That had been four years ago, and he had since had a dozen commissions from the Minister, all of them very well paid. Very well paid, my dear little Célimène, and in gold, too; well out of reach of your plump little fingers.

Gaston Barat started from his reflections. Someone had knocked on the door. A man entered, flushed with running.

It was Jean Michaud, signalman from the telegraph station.

‘Well, Jean, what is it?’

The signalman fumbled in the pocket of his blue-striped jacket.

‘Message for you,’ answered Jean. ‘I thought I’d

better bring it myself. It's marked priority.'

Barat took the dirty piece of paper and nodded a dismissal. But Jean Michaud stood firm, twisting his greasy cap.

'Well?' said Gaston Barat sharply.

'I thought I'd better bring it myself,' repeated Jean, with the weary detachment of a man for whom the world is a wicked place.

Barat sighed and pulled a five-franc piece from his pocket.

'Thank you, Mr. Postmaster. Hoping to drink your health, and best respects to madam.'

'Go round to the kitchen. They'll give you what you want.'

Jean Michaud shambled from the room.

Barat waited for him to vanish and then slipped quickly from his chair, locked the door and went to the window. There was no one in the street, but it was best to take no risks. He drew the curtain, plunging the room into twilight. He then pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked a drawer of the desk by his chair. From the drawer he took a small iron box, which he unlocked with another key, and removed the single paper it contained. This he spread out in front of him and laid beside it the thumbled message brought by the signalman. Slowly he began to decipher the groups of letters, whistling the *Ça ira* under his breath as he did so. In quarter of an hour he sat back on his chair and read the deciphered message:

Message begins. Lieutenant Adrien Longchamps, left Paris noon 8th, riding post for general headquarters stop. Description follows: Age 18, height 5' 10, eyes brown, hair dark brown to black, small moustache on upper lip stop. Is wearing green and red uniform of the Third Hussars stop. May pass as Felix Marbot of Emperor's household stop. You

are to forward any papers found on him by special courier immediately stop. Longchamps is to disappear. AJAX.

Barat read this message through again to make quite sure that he understood his instructions. This was a rather more serious job than usual.

He sat a moment longer, staring at the wall opposite his desk. Longchamps had left Paris on the eighth. Barat pulled open another drawer and took from it a map which he spread out in front of him. Soon he put a thin finger on a patch of green. Two inches above it and to the right was printed the word 'Lectoure.'

'He will be in the Landes tomorrow,' he said to himself, studying the map.

Cousin Dompierre, who kept the relay of the Fat Goose, was to be trusted. He would expect to be paid, of course, but not too much. He need only be told that the young man when he arrived must be sent on with the postilion, who would be waiting there for the purpose.

Mauriac should be the postilion, and he, with Chante-reine, would do the job, deep in the middle of the pine forest. Chantereine and one or two others—he must pick his men carefully—would wait by the bend, the only bend in the straight road for twenty leagues.

They would all want money, of course. But that would go down as expenses.

The Minister of Police was generous in these matters.

§ 5

Caroline Murat lay in her bed, her heavy white shoulders propped on the lace pillow, looking towards the open window. It was a fine morning and the sun shone on the wrinkled waters of the Bay of Naples and

the brilliant skirting of foam that followed each small curve of the shore.

For the last month she had lived on expectation, and it was thin food for a mind that had a healthy craving for results. Talleyrand had given her to understand that a letter might come at any moment. But already the Emperor was in Spain and not a word from Paris.

Caroline, Empress of the French—the thought had grown and budded and borne delicious fruit. She felt for the leather notebook, thrust beneath the sheets overnight, in which she had amused herself with jottings of the ceremonial to be used at the coronation. Personally she favoured a noble austerity, such as had attended the coronations of the French kings, but Joachim would demand magnificence, a large display of gold and bright colours. He would wish to outdo the splendours which had surrounded her overbearing brother on that December day, four years ago, when she had been forced to carry Josephine's train in company with her sisters. Her lips curled as she recalled how she and Pauline had deliberately dropped the train as Josephine was moving up the altar steps to receive the crown, and how, its weight dragging suddenly at her shoulders, Josephine had stumbled and nearly fallen. They had said at the time that it was an omen.

There would be no such mischance at the coronation of the Empress Caroline. Eight Marshals of the Empire should bear her train. That would show the world that Napoleon's veteran commanders accepted and welcomed her.

She turned as her husband entered the room. He had been riding early and was fresh from the bath. His hair was curling fiercely after drying and he wore a loose gown of gorgeous brocade, secured with heavy tassels of gold.

She propped herself on an elbow and looked him over, this fine but stupid animal of whom she would make an Emperor. It was to her, of course, and not to him that Talleyrand was looking.

'No news?' she asked, though she had no need to inquire, for he still wore the expression of sullen impatience with which she was now so familiar.

The bed creaked and tilted as he sat down on the side of it.

'You know well enough how it is, Caroline,' he grumbled. 'Those two foxes in Paris are not going to move as long as the Emperor succeeds in Spain.'

'Succeeds!'

'Succeeds,' repeated Murat. 'Didn't he get to Madrid after only one battle, and that was a mere affair of outposts?'

He picked up an alabaster pot and began to twist it in his hands.

'Put that down,' said Caroline sharply. 'How many times have I asked you not to play with it?'

'Sorry,' muttered Murat and began swinging the leg that lay across his knee.

'You read Fresnoy's letter?' she continued.

'Of course.'

'Do you think, after reading it, that the battle you mentioned was a brilliant feat of arms?'

Murat stopped swinging his leg and turned to his wife. His brow cleared and a gleam of what might pass for intelligence came into his eyes.

'No,' he said, 'it was a thoroughly bad show, so far as I can make out. Sending cavalry uphill against a battery of guns. I wouldn't have let him do it, if I'd been there.'

There was a short silence. What was going on in that thick head of his? He began to speak again and there

was a note of reluctant admiration, almost of satisfaction, in his tone.

‘But the little man has brought it off again,’ he said. ‘There’s no getting away from that. It’s all very well, my dear, to talk and plan as though he had shot his bolt, but he isn’t finished yet. He forced that pass with little more than his own cavalry escort and then went right through to Madrid. Now, I suppose, he is cutting the English to pieces. The little Corporal still knows how to make war.’

‘What was true of the little Corporal has ceased to be true of the Emperor. Fresnoy’s account leaves little to the imagination. He is destroying his army with forced marches which accomplish nothing. The English are not, as he tells the world, surrounded. They are getting safely away to the coast.’

‘The English are on the run and he is kicking them up the backside as hard as he can.’

‘He has never been anywhere near enough to kick them up the backside or anywhere else. They are moving faster than he can follow. They’ll get away from him, Joachim.’

‘They wouldn’t get away if I were in charge of the Cavalry,’ muttered Murat.

His face flushed and glowed with the thought of it.

‘We’d bring it off together, he and I, as we have often done before.’

Caroline sat upright in bed, thrusting her hands among the pillows behind her.

‘So that’s what you’d like to do, is it?’ she demanded. ‘Go back to your master? Do his work for him? Spend yourself in his employment? What good has it done you? Look what you did in Spain. You brought the country to heel. You thought you were earning a kingdom; but you were only warming

the seat for Joseph. I know my brother. He will use you as you use your horse, ride you to death and allow you just enough oats to be serviceable.'

She looked sidelong at him as he sat upon the bed, measuring the effect of her tirade. She knew just how to dose her contempt with flattery. She could warm and prick him as she pleased.

He got off the bed and began to pace up and down the room. How to move him further? The time perhaps had come for a touch of sentiment.

'Come here, Joachim,' she said in a changed voice.

He approached the bed obediently, his face still dark. She took one of his hands in both her own.

'My dear,' she said, speaking very slowly and looking full in his face. 'Why do you think I allowed myself to be persuaded into this affair? Napoleon is my brother. Yet I am working against him. It is because I know that, unless we play together, you and I, for our own hand, you will never get what is justly due to you for your services to the Empire. It isn't easy for me to see you sitting here, wasting your great gifts, raising money and men for my brother, accepting his orders, accepting even his insults. He has no sense at all of what he owes to you and no regard for your qualities. Why do you think Fouché and Talleyrand have chosen you, you out of all the others, Davoût, Berthier, Soult, Lefebvre and the rest? Because they know, as I know, that you are the natural successor of Napoleon by reason of your ability and all you have done to put him where he is today. They share my faith in you, Joachim, and I know that, if we stand together, you, who have shown yourself a great captain, have it in you to be also a great Emperor.'

Was she perhaps laying on the colour with too heavy a hand?

'Think so, Caroline?' he asked.

She pulled him towards her so that he sat down again beside her.

'Of course I do,' her voice was deliberately husky. 'That is why I married you, my dear.'

He bent over her. She slipped an arm round his neck and drew the swarthy face down to the white shoulder lying heavily back on the pillows. He began to fondle the smooth flesh, cool under his hot hand. He smelt of the bath. A fine animal, and a fine animal was a gift of God. Her pulses began to beat unmannerly. She drew back his head and looked submissively into his eyes which had smouldered in sudden desire.

'Better lock the door,' she whispered softly.

§ 6

Now, when sleep was permitted, it eluded him. Not once had he lost consciousness of the wide bed on which he lay, the room with its sloping roof and the tallow dip that burned in the corner, throwing huge shadows on the discoloured ceiling. His body cried out for rest, but his spirit would not be merciful.

Felix sat up and swung his legs to the ground. His head was like lead; his mouth and eyes were sticky with sleep; his back between the shoulder-blades ached and his thighs were stiff as boards. But if he could not sleep, he might just as well be riding.

The postmaster and his wife, landlord and hostess of the Fat Goose, had been very kind, and had made him

lie down on their own bed, swearing that they never used it before midnight, which was of course not to be believed in a country place miles from anywhere. But they had wanted him to accept their offer and he had been persuaded, telling himself that without some rest he might falter by the way, as indeed the new postilion had suggested.

Felix rose from the bed. An earthenware bowl was lying on a table with a water-jug beside it. He crossed the room, poured the water into the bowl and plunged his face into it. The shock of the cold water freshened him. He shook his head, looking for a towel, and, finding none, made shift to dry his face on the counterpane. Then he sat down on a stool beside the bed and put on his spurs, the only things he had taken off. This done, he looked at his watch, a gold repeater given him by Walewska as a souvenir of their journey together months ago from Poland.

It was half-past one in the morning. He had come at a fine pace from Mont de Marsan, and, if he made the same speed through the flat country that lay between him and Bayonne, he would reach the town in the late morning.

He opened the door of the bedroom and started to descend the open stairs which led straight down into the main room of the inn. Something was dragging along the bare boards behind him. He looked down. His spur had caught in the edge of a small rush mat beside the door. He bent down and disengaged the spur and, as he did so, he heard a voice in the living-room below.

‘When you see the lantern, then.’

Felix, beginning to descend the stairs, saw that the door of the inn was open. Two men, dark shadows in the light of the fire, were slipping away outside.

The postmaster met him at the foot of the stairs. His good fellowship seemed a little worn. There was even a sharpness in his tone, as of a man disconcerted, and Felix suddenly decided that he had seen better faces in his time.

'You have a good half-hour yet, Lieutenant,' the man protested.

'I cannot sleep,' said Felix shortly. 'So I will start at once.'

The postmaster shrugged his fat shoulders.

'It isn't possible, Lieutenant. Not for half an hour. The horses are not ready.'

'Nonsense, man. It doesn't take half an hour to saddle a horse.'

The postmaster put his hand on Felix's arm.

'Half an hour does not make all that difference, Lieutenant,' he said, urging him gently across the room to where the remains of a great pine log blazed on the open hearth. 'You were not to start till two and Jean there needs his rest.'

He pointed to the postilion, Jean Mauriac, snoring on a bench beside the fire, and placed Felix in a chair.

'What about some smoked ham?' he suggested.

'Food,' muttered Felix, and sat gazing into the flames.

The landlord touched his elbow and he sat up with a start. Sleep, which had eluded him upstairs in the bedroom, had almost overcome him beside the warmth of the fire. He took the plate of bread and ham on his knees and, as he ate, his mind began to work again.

'What are the roads to Bayonne like?' he asked.

'They should be in fine condition, sir. We have had a drop of rain, but nothing much to worry about.'

You will make good time through the forest.'

The postilion lying on the bench opposite suddenly stopped snoring and sat up with a jerk like an automatic figure.

'Two o'clock,' said the landlord. 'You could set your watch by him. He can wake at any hour he chooses. Can't you, Mauriac? I told him two o'clock, and two o'clock it is.'

The postilion yawned and got to his feet. He was a short wiry little man and his face reddened as he bent to put on his boots. At the same instant there came a jingle of bits and the sound of hoofs outside the door. Felix rose from the chair, pulled out money and put it on the table.

'Too much, sir,' said the innkeeper.

'Give some to the ostler,' said Felix and went towards the door.

It was very dark outside. The Fat Goose stood back from the road in a small clearing, but the forest pressed about it on all sides. Felix swung himself into the saddle and, gathering up the reins, sat waiting. The postilion appeared in the doorway, a lantern in his hand which the landlord took from him as he, too, climbed on to his horse.

'What is that?' said Felix as the landlord handed up the lantern.

'It's dark in the forest, Lieutenant,' said the postilion. 'You'll be riding blindfold and had better follow me. I'll have the lantern on my back.'

Felix, by the light streaming through the open inn door, saw that the man was fastening the lantern between his shoulder-blades, where it was held fast by a contraption of leather. This was presumably a local device for riding through the Landes at night and a very sensible device it seemed.

The postilion settled himself in the saddle and shook the reins. The landlord stood back.

'Good night, Mauriac. See you tomorrow.'

Felix waved his hand and rode after the postilion. They turned to the right and the pines closed in upon them, loading the darkness with a persistent, heady fragrance.

The lantern, bobbing ahead, was the only thing Felix could see. The air was cold upon his face. But the horse under him was fresh and they swung along at a good warming pace. The forest, he knew, stretched for miles. He had looked at it carefully on the map he carried. You could make good speed on these flat roads. He wished he could see the trees. But he could see the lantern.

Somewhere an echo whispered: *When you see the lantern, then.* Who had said that? Where had he heard it? He had heard it, of course, at the inn. He had been standing on top of the stairs; the man who had said it was the innkeeper and he had said it to two men who had slipped away.

Felix swallowed in his throat. Had he perhaps been dreaming? No, something had caught in his spur and, as he had bent down to disengage it, he had heard the words distinctly.

Somewhere along the road there would be two men. They would be waiting to see the lantern. But they would not see it coming, because the postilion carried it on his back; unless, of course, the postilion had arranged to show it them.

Felix bent forward and raised the flap of the holster attached to the saddle. It was as well to make sure that his pistol was in order. He thrust his hand into the mouth of the holster.

The holster was empty.

Felix was now very wide awake. In front the lantern bobbed rhythmically up and down. To what was it leading him? Two men were waiting and the postilion made a third. The odds, even though he was now prepared, were heavy.

Felix shortened the reins and looked from side to side. The road was perhaps twenty feet broad, but he could not see the further edge of it, for it was black beneath the pines. There was no turning aside; the trees were thick and stretched, as he knew, for miles on either hand. There was no turning back, for he was on the Emperor's service.

Who were these men? Were they robbers or were they spies warned of his business? Yet how could they have been warned and waiting for him within a few hours' ride of Bayonne? He had outstripped any possible messenger from Paris.

These were questions to be settled later. His present business was to get through to Bayonne and thence to the Emperor with what he carried.

The postilion in front had slowed down. Felix felt for the hilt of his sabre and loosened the blade. The lantern between the shoulders of the postilion went out suddenly and Felix checked his horse at once to a slow trot. A second later the lantern flared again and the man's voice came back to him.

'The road curves here, sir. Round to the right.'

'Carry on,' shouted Felix. 'I'll follow the light.'

He realised as he spoke what had happened. The postilion had turned in his saddle, so that the lantern on his back might convey a signal to the unknown men who were waiting at the bend of the road.

Felix drew his sabre. Should he ride at the fellow? But what of the other two? They would be posted with pistols and there was bound to be something

obstructing the road, a rope or a small cart. There was no chance of riding all three of them down in the darkness.

He pulled at the left rein and gave his horse a light touch of the spur. It bounded from the road on to the soft turf beside it.

'This way, sir,' shouted the postilion. 'You're leaving the road.'

Felix bent low over his horse's head. He could not guide the animal, but could only trust him to gallop safely into the shelter of the trees. His knee came in contact with a trunk and was crushed between the bole and his horse's flank. The horse reared in panic and then stood trembling. Less than five yards away a pale splash of light bobbed, wavered and went out. Then suddenly came a flash of fire, a bright orange ribbon on black velvet. His horse bounded forward into the trees. All about him was the crackle and crash of branches and then, to his right, a creaking of leather and the heavy breathing of man and beast.

He realised that the postilion had ridden after him into the forest and was close beside him.

'God's curse,' said a thick voice in his ear.

Felix slashed out with his sabre, backhanded and blindly in the darkness. The blade jarred on something which yielded beneath its edge, till the steel grated against bone.

'Christ! . . . Christ!' came a voice at his side.

There followed a confused shouting and trampling of feet, and at that instant Felix's horse leaped forward again.

The cries fell away behind him and he threw back his head. A single star showed far above him. The trees had receded a little from either hand. He was in some sort of ride or avenue and his horse was galloping

down it, out of control. The trees marched beside him on either hand. There was no one in the forest but himself and his horse.

Then he felt the beast falter beneath him. The wild gallop dwindled to a lurching canter. Soon it stopped altogether and the animal rolled over sideways, throwing him on to the point of his left shoulder.

§ 7

‘So you can tell me nothing?’

Josephine spread wide the fingers of her right hand and looked at the old lady, stiff and upright in her high-backed chair. The gesture conveyed a puzzled negative and she at the same time pursed her lips in a way which, as she well knew, never failed to irritate her mother-in-law. Letizia Bonaparte esteemed it a girlish trick, absurd in a woman well over forty.

‘But you are well acquainted with Talleyrand,’ Letizia persisted.

‘I am not God Almighty and I doubt if even He knows what goes on in the mind of the Prince of Benevento.’

‘Fouché at least is your friend.’

‘Not since he proposed that I should offer to divorce the Emperor.’

Letizia chuckled dryly.

‘The citizen Fouché is not lacking in courage.’

Josephine looked sourly at her visitor.

‘You approve, perhaps?’

‘My son is still waiting for an heir.’

Josephine took a grip of herself. The old woman had never troubled to conceal her small regard for the wife of Napoleon. ‘You might have kept him within bounds’ was what Letizia had hinted more

than once, and of course it was true. On account of that Letizia not only disliked but despised her. Why then had she come all the way to the Tuileries on a winter afternoon?

'There's something between those two,' said Letizia. 'They were hatching it that evening in the Princess de Vaudémont's Orangery. I heard little, but quite enough! This is serious, Josephine. Get that into your head. I have sent for Walewska.'

'Walewska?'

'Three heads are better than one and Walewska may know something.'

'Fouché and Talleyrand are strange companions. You suggest for me an alliance which is even more surprising.'

'My son is in danger. Here are three women who wish to save him—his mother, his wife and his mistress.'

'My husband appears to be doing pretty well without us. The news from Spain . . .'

'You need not repeat your husband's bulletins, my dear. I can read them for myself. I can read them, perhaps, as well as Talleyrand and Fouché, who seem to be doing their best to unsettle the people of Paris. Why do they go out of their way to behave as though the Emperor might now be disregarded? I shouldn't be surprised to hear that they were plotting to give my son a successor.'

'It is true, madam!'

Josephine swung her head sharply round. Walewska was coming towards them from a door in the corner of the boudoir, which was closing softly.

Josephine looked at her critically. Leroy, she decided, either did not know his business or had been overruled. This time he had overdone simplicity.

The Polish rose was too fully blown for a treatment so ingenuous. The voice of her mother-in-law recalled her to graver matters.

'Thank you for coming, my dear,' said Letizia. 'We need someone with a head. What can you tell us of this business?'

Josephine composed herself for the reverence due to an Empress, but, as Walewska dipped in her curtsy, Letizia broke in sharply.

'Sit down, child. We are not in court.'

Josephine with difficulty suppressed a comment.

'What do you know?' repeated Letizia. 'You can be open with us. We all want to do the best for my son.'

The older woman, leaning forward, was pointing to a chair, and Walewska, without further ceremony, sat down.

Josephine noted that a little colour had come into her white cheeks. The girl did not look at all well, but her nervousness came quickly under control as she spoke.

'Fouché came to me some days ago. It was, I think, the day after the reception given by Talleyrand in his honour. He came to me as a loyal servant of the Emperor. So, at least, he said. He warned me that Talleyrand had made up his mind that the Emperor could not possibly succeed in Spain.'

Letizia nodded.

'Talleyrand makes no secret of his opinions.'

'Talleyrand has discussed with Fouché the steps to be taken if the Emperor should not return from Spain, and Fouché has told me that he felt it necessary to seem a consenting party so that he might have clear proof of what was intended. He has even gone so far as to sign a letter to the King of Naples.'

'The King of Naples!'

Letizia waved her hand impatiently at Josephine.

‘Let the child tell her story.’

Josephine controlled herself with an effort. So they would bring that blockhead to Paris. Caroline was at the bottom of this. She had always wanted to be first. Josephine sat rigid in her chair. No words would come to relieve her. Besides she must listen. Walewska was talking again of the message to Murat.

‘Fouché warned me that the letter was going by post. He gave me this information, so that I might arrange to have it intercepted. He did not wish to appear openly in the matter.’

‘Where is the letter, now?’

Letizia was speaking.

‘It is on its way to the Emperor, madam. Monsieur Lavalette took it from the Italian mails and it is being carried by my own equerry, who started for Spain three days ago.’

Josephine leaned back in her chair. She must give her mind to this business.

‘Fouché plays for no one but himself,’ she said harshly. ‘But no matter. He evidently chooses to stand well with the Emperor. That can only mean that he thinks Bonaparte has no need yet of a successor.’

‘Napoleon will have no successor,’ said Letizia quietly. ‘He is the only one of my children who can hold the situation which he has made for himself.’

‘And Caroline?’

‘Caroline is a bad woman,’ answered Letizia Bonaparte shortly. ‘I whipped her as a child; I should have whipped her more often. She was always stubborn and conceited. As for my son, Napoleon, you may destroy him between you, but none of you can succeed him.’

Walewska leaned forward and put her hands on the knees of Letizia.

'Madam,' she stammered. 'Is there anything further we can do?'

Letizia looked gravely down at the upturned face. A pretty picture, thought Josephine, but the sneer was thin.

'You have done all that is possible,' Letizia was saying. 'You can depend on this young man?'

Walewska looked at a loss for a moment.

'The young man who is carrying the letter to my son?' Letizia prompted.

'Certainly.'

For a moment there was silence in the room. Letizia was looking intently at Walewska.

'This,' she said, 'is the first attempt yet made to provide Napoleon with an heir. I wish it might not again be necessary.'

Josephine rose abruptly. Her forehead and cheeks were scarlet and she looked aside at Walewska. She knew what was in the mind of Letizia. So, apparently, did the person whom it most concerned.

'There is nothing now but to wait,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

She thrust out her hand and closed her eyes. Something soft and dry touched it for a moment. When she looked round again, Marie Walewska was leaving the room.

§ 8

Felix, bending over the horse, saw blood welling from its mouth and nostrils. The bullet of the postilion had pierced its lung.

He straightened himself and gently rubbed his shoulder, which throbbed where it had struck the ground. Sleep and fatigue had vanished before this peril.

He left the horse where it had fallen and penetrated among the pines, where he stood a moment wondering what to do. His enemies might at any moment come galloping down the ride. They would find the dead horse. Then they would beat the woods for him on either side.

He leaned against the rough bole. His naked sabre was still in his hand. Was there nothing left for him but to put his back against a tree and sell his life as dearly as he could? Not that they would have to pay very much. They need not even close with him, but would shoot him down from a safe distance. Then they would take the letter.

Who could these men be? He had set out, as he understood, with the connivance of Fouché and he was on the Emperor's business. Was this, then, the work of Talleyrand? It smelled of a grosser hand. Had Fouché, perhaps, thought better of his loyalty?

These questions must wait. His ear had caught the beat of a horse's hoof. It was useless to blunder between the trees. It was equally useless to fight on foot with a sabre against men who were armed with pistols. He sheathed the weapon and retraced his steps to the edge of the ride.

There lay the horse, a dark hump in the moonlight. Felix looked about him. Were all the trees straight and smooth for the first twenty feet of their growth? Not all of them. There was a dwarf beech ten yards to his right with a great bough hanging above the ride. He scrambled upwards with an effort which tore his finger tips, straddled the bough and worked himself forward till he could lie full length along it, crossing his feet at the ankles so that they made a crutch which supported him. His sabre, thrust between his side and the smooth bark of the bough, pressed into him,

its hilt hard against his breastbone, but there was no time to shift it. The slightest rustle would betray him.

The men were coming fast. Even as he turned his head, he saw first one and then another lurching down the ride and, a moment later, one of them fell to cursing as his mount shied at the body of the fallen horse.

'Look out there,' came the voice of the man behind him.

One of the horses gave a whinnying cry as the two figures halted beside the dead beast.

'He is on foot,' said the first man, 'and cannot be far away.'

'Where is Mauriac?' demanded the first.

'You won't see Mauriac again. The young bastard pretty near cut his head off. Got him between the neck and shoulder.'

Felix lay still upon his branch. The voices came up to him out of the darkness. The men had moved slightly and were now not two yards away, sitting their horses.

'Listen,' said the first man.

'I hear nothing,' grumbled the second.

'A little to the right,' responded the first.

'A pig,' suggested the second.

'It's our man,' insisted the first. 'He will be pushing his way through the wood. Hold my horse, while I go after him.'

The man dismounted and passed into the shadow. Felix peered down. Just beneath him was the second of the two men sitting one of the horses and holding the other. Should he continue to lie on the branch till they gave up the search? If only he could see more clearly the exact position of the man below.

Felix shifted his head and, as he got a better view, realised with a shock that the man on the horse was staring straight upwards. It was, indeed, the moonlight striking on his face which showed Felix where he was. The man's looks betrayed no gleam of intelligence. Perhaps he could not see into the shadow, but at any moment he might shout, pull out his pistol and bring Felix crashing down like a rook from his perch.

The suspense was not to be borne and, before he knew it, Felix jumped.

He landed with one knee on the neck of the man's horse and the other in the stomach of its rider. His hand grasped a wiry growth of beard and he was aware of a sudden warm reek of garlic and stale wine. The man gave a wild shout and the horse backed savagely, throwing its rider who fell to the ground with one foot caught in the stirrup.

The movement threw Felix sideways, so that he sprawled face downwards across the back of the second horse, which instantly started forward. Felix took a firm grip of its neck and groped with his thighs for the saddle. He found his seat and pulled the horse round. The other horse had bolted and was a flying shadow, galloping down the ride in the direction from which it had come, with a dark bundle dragging beside it along the ground.

Felix cantered easily down the ride, disregarding the cries of the man in the wood, who was shouting to know what had happened. He tried to remember the lie of the country as he had studied it on the map. The Landes stretched, as he knew, for miles, till they merged into a wide valley at the feet of the Pyrenees. He must find a pass from the valley which would bring him to the Bidassoa and he could no longer trust

himself to the main roads. Henceforth he must ride alone and fend for himself.

The ride down which he was galloping was shortly intersected by another. Felix turned his horse's head to the right, a change which set him roughly in the direction of Spain and the Emperor.

The horse, now that he had it under control, was a straightforward animal with a hard mouth and a capacity for moving at a loping canter which seemed tireless. Every now and then the interminable forest was crossed by other rides and by narrow paths. Felix took his general direction from such stars as he could see, but, as the night wore on, he became too weary to think coherently. It grew gradually light, and the trees, from being a dark impenetrable mass, became a procession of pillars wheeling monotonously to right and left.

At long last the sun came up and he saw, in a considerable clearing, a small farm-house. A girl, short and thick-set, was standing by the open door shading her eyes with her hand. The horse, too, saw the farm-house and pulled up suddenly. Felix gripped the saddle in a last effort to save himself from falling. The girl, as it seemed, was looking at him. He could see her only very vaguely, though the light was strong, but she had her mouth open and there were two rows of ugly teeth.

'Sleep . . . despatches . . . the Emperor,' muttered Felix.

The girl still stared at him with open mouth.

He groped in his pocket for a coin and, at sight of the gold, the girl shut her mouth and nodded.

'You can sleep in there,' she said, pointing to a byre in which two cows were standing.

Felix slipped from the saddle and nearly fell.

‘I’ll take the horse,’ said the girl.

Without a word Felix handed her the half Napoleon and stumbled into the byre. It was warm with the heat of the cows and in one corner was a heap of fodder.

‘I’ll feed the horse,’ the girl said, but Felix heard no more. He was fast asleep in the straw on which he had thrown himself.

§ 9

‘Two hundred and fifty thousand at eighty-nine, that is not so bad, Luynes.’

Talleyrand sat back in his chair, smiling on his man of affairs who stood opposite him on the other side of the table and turned the pages of a small brown notebook.

‘I disposed of a similar packet, Serene Highness, just before the Bourse closed at eighty-eight and seven-eighths.’

‘At what price did we buy them in the first place?’

Talleyrand put the question with indifference. It was impolitic to show too much interest in these transactions, though, of course, the little man with the notebook fully realised his master’s love of money and profit.

‘At seventy-two, Serene Highness.’

‘The price seems to be holding up remarkably well,’ said Talleyrand thoughtfully.

Luynes glanced up from the pages of the notebook.

‘Your Serene Highness appears to be the only seller of importance,’ he began.

Talleyrand sat up a little in his chair.

‘What’s that you say, Luynes? Am I the only seller in the market?’

‘No considerable parcels except those offered by

Your Serene Highness have come upon the market within the last forty-eight hours.'

'You are sure of this, Luynes?'

'Quite sure, Serene Highness.'

'Thank you, Luynes. Please stop selling until further instructions from me.'

'Very good, Serene Highness.'

Luynes rose from the table, pushed the chair on which he had been sitting beneath the mahogany, bowed and left the room with neat, precise steps.

Talleyrand watched the door close, a look on his face of faint perplexity. He was, it seemed, the only considerable seller of French Government stock. Where, then, was Fouché? He too, anticipating revolution, should be in the market. He must own many millions of such stock and it would come down with a rush as soon as their plans matured. But Fouché was holding on, and that could only mean that he was not yet satisfied that the Emperor was losing ground.

Talleyrand lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. If Fouché believed that the Emperor might yet succeed in Spain, he would have left a hole big enough to provide the rat he was with an exit. Yet he had signed the letter to Murat and that letter left neither of them with any means of retreat.

Talleyrand opened his eyes. Casimir de Montrond was standing by his chair.

'You are looking worried,' said Montrond and plumped himself down on a sofa. 'Not fallen out with your new friend, by any chance?'

'No, Casimir. I'm only wondering whether I've made it impossible for him to play false.'

'Not God Himself could do that, unless He re-created the fellow in another image. Why this sudden

affection for that nasty little man from the Quai Voltaire?'

'Can it be that at last you are inquisitive?'

'No, but I'm tired of trying to explain the situation to your friends. They none of them like it or find any sense in it.'

Talleyrand smiled. It was pleasant to see that handsome face puckering with anxiety on his account.

'I have called the tune,' he said, 'and Fouché is dancing.'

'You are over confident, Charles.'

Talleyrand wondered whether this were true and, for a moment, was tempted to confide in his friend. But he suppressed the impulse. Not even Casimir must know of the letter to Murat—at least, not yet. Later on, perhaps, when Murat was on the throne, and the time came to take such further steps as might be necessary to bring back the Bourbon, Casimir would be useful.

'Talk no more of Fouché,' he begged, and allowed a note of boredom to creep in, so that his friend might know that the subject was distasteful. 'I did well last night at the tables.'

'So I understand. I saw de Livry today and he swore that another such evening would beggar him. By the way, Charles,' he added abruptly, 'would you know Fouché's chair if you saw it?'

'Chair?' murmured Talleyrand. 'I thought we had finished with Fouché. As far as I remember, it is a plain, grey chair, with leather curtains.'

'I saw a chair of that description at the end of the Rue d'Houssaye a few days ago.'

'Indeed? Are you qualifying for a post in my new friend's department of special police?'

Montrond, he noted uneasily, did not smile.

'Is it part of the compact between you that he should visit the Walewska?'

'She entertains, I believe, very handsomely.'

'At one o'clock in the morning?'

Talleyrand opened his eyes a trifle wider and stared at his friend.

'At one o'clock in the morning,' he repeated.

He thought for a moment, and rose from his chair.

'You might possibly do me a service if you would, Casimir. Will you wait a moment?'

'Certainly, Charles.'

Talleyrand limped slowly across the room. He paused on the way to his desk and half turned.

'What day was it that you saw the chair?'

'I don't remember exactly. Four or five days ago.'

'It was not, at any rate, as recently as yesterday?'

Talleyrand spoke a little sharply. It was tiresome of Casimir to be so vague.

'Four or five days ago,' Montrond repeated.

Talleyrand continued his way to the desk, reached it and sat down.

So Fouché was visiting Walewska and holding on to his securities. Evidently he still thought well of the Emperor's chances and meant to be safe, whatever happened. *Utrinque paratus*.

Talleyrand smiled as he laid a sheet of paper before him and dipped a quill into the ink. He would commit his unwilling partner beyond return. Murat would shortly be receiving the warning letter and Caroline must be itching to move.

Talleyrand wrote on the sheet a single word, sanded it and, when the ink was dry, handed it to Montrond.

'I want you to send this for me by visual telegraph to the Queen of Naples,' he said.

Montrond stared at the sheet.

‘Rubicon,’ he read.

Talleyrand watched the surprise grow in his eyes and a flicker of fear that came and went.

‘I do not understand what it means,’ Montrond protested.

Talleyrand smiled and tapped his friend lightly on the shoulder.

‘No, Casimir,’ he said. ‘You do not understand what it means.’

§ 10

It was the shaft of sunlight striking his face that woke him up. Felix turned over, wincing from the soreness of his thigh-bone, which had worked through the thin straw to the hard ground beneath. Automatically his hand went to his breast pocket where the despatch came smooth and warm to his fingers.

He scrambled to his feet and brushed the stubble from his stained and crumpled jacket. He walked to the door of the barn. The sun was high. He judged it to be about noon, and a glance at his watch confirmed the fact.

He felt hungry and made his way to the farm-house, fifty yards to the left. It stood, squat and four square in the bright winter sunshine. A blue tangle of smoke drifted from its single chimney. Felix, as he approached, heard the sound of heavy boots on a tiled floor, a clatter of plates and the creak of a bench called upon suddenly to support a heavy weight.

He moved round the corner of the house, but stopped dead.

A man, climbing stiffly from a horse, was at the door. His face was in profile, but visibly he had a beard, straggling and disordered. He was of a fresh complexion and thick-set, his legs slightly bowed.

The stranger slipped the reins over an iron hook projecting from the wall of the farm-house, and, raising his riding-whip, beat upon the door. Felix stepped back, so that he was covered by the angle of the house. Near him was a window. It was shut, but the glazed paper covering the frame was torn in several places.

‘A young officer?’ repeated someone in the house. ‘No. No one has passed this way.’

‘He was traced to the woods,’ said the man at the door. ‘We lost him in the darkness.’

‘What do you want with him?’

‘Deserter,’ said the man at the door. ‘There’s a reward for his capture.’

With great caution Felix applied his eye to a rent in the waxed paper and looked into the interior of the farm-house. The room was low and broad. Seated at the table was the farmer, a large man, his face shining through the steam which rose from a great plate of vegetables in front of him. Behind him stood the girl whom Felix had met that morning in the barn. Her face wore an owlish look.

‘Did you see anyone this morning, Marie, at milking time?’ asked the farmer.

Marie shook her head.

‘Well, there’s five napoleons going begging,’ said the man at the door.

Felix drew away from the window and looked about him. The country was no longer flat, but sloped away from the house towards a range of hills. Of immediate cover there was none.

A footstep sounded close. Some one was coming round the house from the back door. His hand went to his sabre hilt, but, before he could draw, a brown arm, dirty but not ill-shaped, came into view. Four fingers crooked and beckoned.

Felix took half a dozen steps forward and, rounding the corner, confronted the girl.

‘Have you five napoleons?’ she whispered.

‘Six,’ he whispered back.

‘Give them to me.’

He produced the coins and the girl grasped at them eagerly.

‘I will give him wine to drink,’ she said. ‘His horse is at the door. But leave me time to get back.’

Felix nodded and the girl retreated the way she had come.

To Felix, waiting in the sunshine, drifted a gust of conversation. Then a door closed noisily and the talking was muffled. He crept quietly towards the horse, slid the reins from the hook and walked him gently away, rubbing his forehead and nostrils. The animal came easily enough and seemed fresh. Felix led him to the rough grass, some fifty yards from the door, flung into the saddle and set off at a sharp canter towards the mountains.

He glanced back over his shoulder and felt at the same time for the holster. There were pistols there and his heart lightened. The farm-house stood silent, the smoke now curling thick from its chimney. The bearded man would eat and drink. It might be some time before he came out.

Felix, urging on the horse, came presently to woods again, but the trees were sparse and he had the line of the mountains for a guide.

He rode all that day and darkness found him on the banks of the river Adour. He turned right-handed, wondering whether he would find a bridge and whether, if he did, he would dare to make use of it. A fisherman, making fast his skiff, solved the difficulty. Felix

induced the man with a bribe to row him over, his horse swimming behind. Thereafter, plunging deeply into woods, he snatched a few hours sleep and started again as soon as it was light enough to see. All that day, too, he rode, stopping only to buy bread and a glass of wine at a lonely farm.

Late in the afternoon, after fording a stream where the water rose barely above his horse's knees, he reached the foothills, which, away to the left, rose to the high bastions of the Pyrenees, steep but rounded slopes ending in sharp rock. In front of him the hills were lower.

Felix raised his head. Was it imagination? Or could he smell the sea. There was a tang of salt in the air. His horse was tired now, though he had done his best to nurse it.

Soon he found himself on a road which ran gently down in the direction of the invisible coast. Here he must go cautiously, for the whole country was doubtless raised against him. Yet he had somehow to discover where he was. He could not continue to ride blindly forward with only the sun and stars for a compass, though the road seemed to be taking him in the right direction, twisting to the south-west.

He followed it for half an hour till, turning a corner, he came upon a travelling pedlar. The man stood by the side of the road, bending over the hoof of his mule, from which he was extracting a stone. The mule, heavily laden, stood dejectedly beneath a walnut tree. The man straightened himself and disclosed a hook-nosed Jewish face, with small black eyes and smudges of beard on his chin. At sight of Felix he broke instantly into speech.

'A flask, my bright young officer,' he said. 'That is what you need, going over the mountains, and I have

it for you here, full of the wine of Limoux, eased with brandy.'

Felix silenced him with a gesture.

'I have missed my way,' he said. 'Can you tell me where I am?'

The pedlar pointed away to the right.

'There lies Saint Pée,' he said, 'but I don't recommend the inn there, young gentleman. You should push on, if you can, to Saint Jean.'

'Tell me,' said Felix, 'do you know the country?'

The little man looked at him.

'Who should know it better? Man and boy I've peddled here for thirty years.'

'Will you be my guide?'

'Not tonight, young gentleman. The mule is tired and I must find sleep and shelter.'

Felix groped in his pocket and produced a napoleon. Its glitter was reflected in the eyes of the pedlar.

'Yes, Excellency,' said the pedlar, 'I see that very well.'

'If you would earn it, lead me to the banks of the Bidassoa.'

'Follow the post road,' said the pedlar, 'and you can cross it by the bridge.'

'I do not wish to cross it by the bridge,' interrupted Felix. 'I am on a secret mission, you understand. Have you, perhaps, a cloak for sale?'

'Is it a cloak you want, Excellency?'

The pedlar was already fumbling at his bales and, from one of them, he drew forth a mustard-coloured riding-cape, which by its cut Felix realised must be at least ten years old.

'A fine coat, Excellency,' said the pedlar, 'and well fitted to your princely person.'

Felix motioned the man to hold his horse. He slipped to the ground and put on the coat which covered his uniform completely.

‘I will buy this coat,’ he said, ‘and, if you can show me across country to the river, you shall have the gold piece as well.’

Their progress was slow, for the pedlar would not leave his mule behind and the poor beast was lame and heavily loaded. For an hour or more Felix followed it through the dusk, which deepened swiftly into night, and it was dark when at last they halted in a copse of dwarf oak trees astride a path that led steeply upwards.

‘I can go no further, Excellency,’ said the pedlar. ‘But you cannot miss the way and the moon is rising. Go up and over the shoulder. Then you will find yourself in a valley. It is the valley of the Bidassoa, and on the further side is Spain.’

Felix dropped the napoleon into the man’s hand and rode on without a word.

The moon came up over the edge of the shoulder as he crossed it, leading his horse, for the path was narrow and strewn with boulders.

At midnight he saw the river, making his way across a frozen waste of marsh which stretched along its banks. The ice crackled beneath his feet and the hooves of his horse. On reaching the stream he mounted, and together, in darkness and great cold, man and beast slipped down the shallow bank and entered the water.

§ II

‘By grand division, to the right—wheel!’

Lines of men in the noon sunshine turned obedient to command. Murat, sitting his horse, watched im-

patiently. Infantry drill was tedious and he had never troubled to understand it. But now that he was a king, in command of an army of his own, he must seem to take an interest. Infantry, of course, was very necessary on the field of battle, but it was a dull, plodding creature, even at best, and these Neapolitans were very far from best.

'Damn it, Colonel,' he roared, lifting his voice suddenly, so that it rose above the distant music of the massed bands, 'your men are straggling all over the place. Can't they even march by the right?'

The Neapolitan Colonel, in his uniform of green and yellow, turned a dull purple.

'Mutinous,' thought Murat, and shouted again:

'Turn your men about and repeat the order.'

The Colonel saluted and roared, and the ragged line turned obediently, more like a green-and-yellow snake wriggling in the dust than a taut ruler pivoting on one end.

The Neapolitan Colonel rode down beside it, cursing the platoon officers, who themselves began to run up and down the ranks and to shout at the sergeants. Murat stiffened his lips to prevent smiling. Even in this comic opera of an army the same habit of mind was to be observed as in the armies of the Emperor. If someone in command was cursed, he passed it along to his subalterns, who in turn passed it to the sergeants and corporals, who took it out of the rank and file, poor devils, who could only take it out of their wives or the drummer boys.

Murat turned for relief to the cavalry. The cavalry was not so bad. They had enjoyed the benefit of his personal attention and he had put some spirit into them. They waited, closely massed, five squadrons of them, sitting at ease on the further edge of the parade ground.

They made a fine picture in their green-and-blue coats, with their sabres flashing in the sun against a background of white houses, and old Vesuvius sulking on the horizon.

The infantry battalions wheeled again, and Murat watched them with an apparently critical eye. But his mind was on the cavalry. Should he ride across and exercise them in the charge?

His horse moved restively under him. It wanted a good gallop and, at a touch of the spur, it bounded forward. The sun was warm on his cheek, a winter sun on a winter day, but it warmed his southern blood. He thrust out his chest and the gold facings of his tunic creaked a little. He felt the brave swing of the scarlet fur-trimmed dolman on his shoulder and noted a fleck of foam on the gold bit between his horse's teeth. He pulled up at the regulation twenty-five paces in front of the squadrons. They sat their horses well, he thought, as he pulled his own about, proudly aware that the eyes of the Neapolitan crowd, collected on the edge of the parade ground, were upon him. Lazzaroni, his brother-in-law called them, and it was true that Naples seemed to have a higher proportion of idlers than any other town in Europe. They had nothing to do but sit in the sun and watch their betters, but, for all that, they were his subjects and would give him a cheer as he led the mimic charge.

He lifted his riding-whip.

'Squadrons—march!' he shouted over his shoulder.

The two lines of horses moved forward obediently.

'Trot,' he shouted as soon as they were in full motion.

The steel breastplates of the Cuirassiers rose and fell like billows under a steady wind. Murat felt his blood stirring. He threw back his head.

‘Gallop,’ he roared, and a moment later, with the full force of his lungs:

‘Charge!’

He brought his riding-cane down with a sweeping gesture and held it stiffly out between his horse’s ears, as was his habit. The beat of the hoofs behind him was good music and, above it, he could hear the shouting of the crowd. Nor was he blind to the fact that the women were waving their handkerchiefs.

For a moment he almost forgot where he was. This was Austerlitz and the Russians were waiting for him with set teeth and despair in their hearts.

He had the squadrons with him now to a man. He could put life into anything that straddled a horse. There was no doubt about it. These men for a moment were inspired. He turned his head to see them coming and, as he did so, his eye caught a hand that fluttered from an open carriage drawn up on the edge of the parade-ground. Murat recognised the nodding plumes of his wife, Caroline.

So she, too, was caught by the infectious bravery of the mimic charge. It was not like Caroline to be thus moved, but, after all, she was a woman, and what woman could be indifferent to the show he made?

Then he noted that the handkerchief was beckoning to him and that the face beneath the plumes was tense and eager. There could be no doubt about the gesture. It was brief and imperious, recalling the sharp motions of her brother.

The fire went out of him. The glow of the charge was checked. He was no longer the finest cavalry leader of all time, but a trainer of raw levies galloping across a dusty parade-ground with a few half-trained squadrons behind him.

He raised his whip, signalling the squadrons to halt.

They seemed to feel his change of mood, for they pulled up raggedly, with much tossing of heads and aimless clatter.

He trotted across the parade-ground towards his wife. The royal escort for the day, a troop of Neapolitan Dragoons, was drawn up fifty paces behind the carriage, so that Caroline waited alone with only a postilion at the horses' heads.

He rode up to the side of the carriage and saluted, lifting his plumed hat with a flourish, at which the crowd cheered lustily, as well they might, for no one could deny that he made a very fine figure in his scarlet and gold. These Neapolitans loved colour and, compared with brother Joseph, who could with difficulty be separated from his umbrella, and the drooling Bourbon whom he had succeeded, Murat felt like the sun-god himself.

'Listen, Joachim.' Caroline spoke sharply and without preface. 'The word has come.'

Her voice cut across the bright pattern of his thoughts. Her cheeks, he noted, were flushed, her eyes bright and hard, her mouth set in a firm line.

'Word,' he repeated sullenly. 'What word?'

'The word from Paris.'

He bent in his saddle, so that his head came down within two feet of her own.

'It came ten minutes ago,' she continued. 'I have it here; a message from Talleyrand.'

'What does he say?'

The parade-ground had grown dusty and small. The design which had filled his thoughts for the last month came crushingly near. His thoughts grew intricate, shot with splendour and dismay.

'Here is the message,' said his wife, and thrust a small sheet of paper into his hand.

He stared at the sheet and read:

Signal Message from the Prince of Benevento. Message begins, RUBICON, message ends.

'It came by visual telegraph to Marseilles,' Caroline continued rapidly. 'From Marseilles it was sent forward by ship. Valuable time has been lost, but you can start tonight and be in Paris within a week.'

Murat turned his eyes from the paper to meet those of his wife.

'Rubicon,' he muttered. 'Rubicon. What does it mean?'

'Talleyrand has need of you in Paris.'

'Then why doesn't he say so? We expected a signed letter with instructions. I don't intend to ride to Paris to ask the fellow what he means.'

'The meaning is clear,' said Caroline sharply.

An angry flush rose in her cheeks. She would break out in a minute. He knew the signs, though she began to speak to him carefully, with the patient control she used in speaking to little Achille when he was fractious.

'Rubicon is the name of a river in Italy,' she explained. 'It was crossed by Caesar on his march to Rome. By crossing it he committed an act of defiance against the Senate and the Roman people. But very soon he was master of the Empire.'

'Then I am to cross the Rubicon? Is that what he means?'

'What else can he mean?'

Murat straightened himself on his horse. He had in his mind's eye a vision of the long road across the Alps in winter, with Paris waiting at the further end, full of stormy and uncertain people, and two men who

plotted against the master he had so far served to the full reach of his powers.

'I don't like it, Caroline,' he muttered. 'If Talleyrand needs me in Paris, let him say so. He could at least have sent me a reasonable message in cipher. The old fox refuses to commit himself and tells us nothing. All we know is that the Emperor is driving the English into the sea. A pretty fool I should look galloping into Paris to find the guns booming at the Invalides and Talleyrand, likely as not, hobbling along and asking me to state my business.'

He looked down at his wife. Her eyes were flaming, her mouth twitching with rage.

'Fool,' she spat at him. 'Do you want it in black and white that you are to succeed the Emperor? Can you expect Talleyrand to compromise himself so openly?'

'He makes no bones about compromising *me*. If I set out for Paris, I should find it difficult to explain how I came to be on the wrong side of the blasted river you mention. I may be a fool, but not such a fool as that.'

'Admit that you haven't the courage. You're afraid of my brother, like everyone else. You prefer to stay here with your tinpot kingdom. Go back to your circus riding. The rabble over there will give you their voices, and, when my brother wants you, he will call you to heel. The swagger will go out of you and you'll be cringing again with the rest of them.'

Murat raised his head, miserable but resolute.

'Are you going to Paris?' she demanded hotly.

'I will go when I receive a plain message. Tell that to your friend Talleyrand when next you go to bed with him.'

He did not wait for her reply, but shook the bridle

of his horse and, with an elaborate salute, trotted smartly towards the waiting squadrons.

The crowd cheered loudly to see the royal leave-taking.

§ 12

Felix was riding without postilions.

For two days now he had been cold, from the moment he had left the icy waters of the Bidassoa and driven his horse, jaded to the point of foundering, through a country stony, dark and hostile, till a wet dawn had broken over the hills and shown him the post road leading to Tolosa. There seemed to be no heat or virtue in his body to resist the icy rain and the bitter, teasing wind.

At Tolosa he met the first of the army transport moving up to the front. It filled the road, churning the mud on either side of the paved centre into thick porridge, but the sight of the French uniforms—they belonged to Mortier's corps—put heart into him. Progress was slow, except on the rare stretches of road not cumbered by waggons or artillery.

At Pampeluña he learned that the Emperor was pursuing the English, the bayonet in their loins, and that he was somewhere beyond Benavente. He sought out the commandant of the town and to him showed a scrawled order from Lavalette, to be used only in an emergency, instructing everybody whom it might concern to give the bearer all possible aid and assistance as a messenger with urgent despatches. General Marisy found him a good horse, advised him not to ride without an escort beyond Burgos, gave him a note to General Grosjean commanding in that city and even found for him a military cloak to replace the mustard-coloured abomination bought from the Jewish pedlar.

Thus equipped his spirits rose, and he rode the whole day over a countryside swept with storms of rain and sleet. But, though his heart was warmer, there rested upon his body a chill not to be stirred even by the great fire lit by troopers of a regiment of Light Horse whom he met at midday by the roadside.

At Burgos General Grosjean was equally obliging, but not equally efficient, and two hours were lost in searching the town for a fresh mount. He waited in a stupor of fatigue, sitting in a wooden armchair in the Archbishop's palace, and it was through a haze that he eventually heard the General's voice.

'Escort ready and waiting.'

Felix staggered to his feet. Outside dusk was falling and it was still raining. He climbed into the saddle, and, surrounded by six troopers of the Third Hussars, clattered out of the town by the high road. On the road from Burgos to Valladolid he saw, with his eyes rather than with his mind, a farmstead by the roadside blazing fiercely, and, against the flames in silhouette, the corpses of two French infantrymen hideously mutilated. The owner of the farmstead was swinging by the neck from a bough of a chestnut tree in front of the door.

At Valladolid there were no horses and he must wait again till his mount was fed and rested. Dawn was breaking as he took the road to Benavente.

His escort was now Dragoons. Their talk was of the English and of the filthy weather. But he heard it only in snatches as he rode with the hunched figures, three in front and two behind. Long ago there had been sunlight on a German road near Erfurt and he had met a Princess when his blood was warm. Still further back he had ridden beside a carriage and bent to tell Walewska that Oriflamme had cast a shoe and

they had stood together beside a forge and the smith's boy had stared in wonder at a piece of gold.

'Hold up, sir!'

A hand upon his arm sent these ghosts flying. One of the escort pointed to a squalid town, half blotted by squalls of rain. On either side of the road lay the bodies of horses in stiff attitudes of death.

'There was a battle here?' demanded Felix.

'English horses,' said the dragoon. 'They shot them when they could go no further.'

Presently he was ascending a muddy street at a walking pace, for it was choked with infantry, mules and sodden men. He saw, wandering in the midst of them all, incongruously, a cook with a white cap on his head. His horse stopped at a crossroads in the middle of the town, and, with an effort to keep himself from falling, he raised his head and looked about him. A man, sitting his horse, was giving orders a few paces away; a general, by the gold on his blue uniform. The rain dripped from his cocked hat.

Felix thrust towards him and made shift to salute. The General raised a keen face on which the rain drops sparkled.

'Despatches for the Emperor, sir. Urgent,' said Felix.

How many times had he repeated that formula in the last interminable days?

The General looked at him.

'Name?' he said sharply.

'Lieutenant Longchamps, sir. Rejoining my unit and carrying despatches from Paris.'

The General looked at him again. Felix got a better view of his face.

'Excuse me, sir; it is General Savary, is it not?'

'It is.'

Felix leaned from his weary horse, gazing at the dark face with the tired eyes, the face of a man living on his nerves. He brought his horse nearer to the General.

'My name is not Longchamps, sir,' he said, 'I am Felix Marbot, in attendance on Madame Walewska. I carry an urgent message for the Emperor.'

'From Paris?'

'From Paris, sir.'

The General turned sharply.

'Get those men off the road there, sergeant. Prisoners are to march in the fields or in the gutter.'

Felix, looking over the General's shoulder, saw a line of red-coated figures being driven to the side of the road. His heart thrilled. These were the English, the first English he had seen, slopping along without arms beneath a thin driving rain. One of them wore a thing like a woman's skirt, with a pouch in front of it covered with hair. Beneath the skirt his bony knees moved gawkily.

So those were the English.

The voice of Savary, sharp in his ear, recalled him.

'You come straight from Madame Walewska?'

'Yes, sir. She gave me a letter, by arrangement with Monsieur Lavalette, to take to the Emperor. She said it was a matter of life and death.'

Savary nodded.

'Officer of the escort,' he barked.

There came a jingle of bits and a grizzled captain with a large moustache, his face puckered with a huge scar, moved forward out of the rain and saluted.

'Has the courier left yet?'

'Just going, sir.'

'This officer will go with him. Double the escort.'

Savary looked at Felix.

'That horse of yours is finished,' he said, and without another word swung from the saddle into the mud.

'Take mine,' he called over his shoulder.

Felix, exchanging his own jaded beast for the splendid animal ridden by the General, found himself beside a mounted man splashed with mud from head to heel. This man was wearing a dark uniform and carried between his shoulders a huge leather despatch case, stamped in gold with the letter N and a laurel wreath.

The officer of the escort rode forward.

'Leave to march off the escort, sir,' he said.

Savary raised his whip and the escort broke into a gallop.

They clattered out of the town and breasted a long slope. Felix could see little but the rising and falling backs of the dragoons as they rode. The sodden day deepened into night and he lost all sense of time and place. He was an automaton which would for ever rise and fall on the back of a horse.

The movement changed and Felix, on the verge of sleep, realised with a start that they were trotting. At the same moment he became aware of a heavy squelching sound, mingled with an occasional grunt or sneeze, and he perceived that they were now riding beside long lines of men who were plodding steadily through the darkness, their boots sucking in and out of the mire.

'The Guard,' said the grizzled captain at his side.

They topped a rise. Against the night sky, very dark but with here and there a star, it seemed to him that he saw a multitude of bare branches moving steadily. It took him a moment to realise that they were the muskets of the Guard, crowned with long

thin bayonets carried as in presence of the enemy. The mud-splashed courier pushed suddenly against him so that his horse swerved. There came a sudden glare, and, when his tired eyes fell into focus, he saw that it came from a great fire flaming and smoking on the side of the road.

In silhouette against the fire stood a short thick-set figure in a plain black hat, set on his head cornerwise, and a grey coat. At the sight of him Felix thrust back his shoulders.

This was the end of his mission.

The regular courier had already handed his portfolio to a tall man with a round face.

'Despatches, sir,' Felix heard him say.

The Emperor thrust out his arm.

'What have we taken?' he asked of the courier, as the despatches were put into his hand.

'Mostly stragglers, sir, and their women. Ten loads of firelocks. Of the prisoners seven hundred are English, sir, and about five thousand Spaniards.'

Felix slipped from his horse. He no longer felt fatigue, though the light from the fire dazzled his eyes.

The Emperor turned.

'Who is this?' he demanded.

'Marbot, sir, with a letter from Paris.'

Felix did not recognise his own voice. He was aware of a dim semicircle of vague forms, but his full consciousness only came to a focus in the grey-clad figure, sharp and distinct in the firelight. There were patches of damp on the shoulders of the grey overcoat. He could not see the eyes, but a hand was thrust out.

'Give it to me!'

Felix held out the letter. The Emperor broke the seal and adjusted the paper so that the firelight shone full upon its surface. Once he flicked it as a large

snowflake fell across the sheet. His face, seen in profile, was all nose and jowl.

For a moment, after reading, he stood quite still, but suddenly came to life. He crushed the paper in his hand.

‘Soult . . . Soult,’ he called.

The tall man stepped forward into the firelight. Napoleon raised his face, weary and set.

‘I start for Paris at once,’ he said. ‘You will take over the army. I can give you ten minutes.’

Taking the astonished marshal by the arm, the Emperor led him away towards the fire.

CHAPTER XV

§ 1

FOR once it was not raining. There was even some warmth in the winter sun and the carriage rode easily. General Thibault felt it possible to hope that his troubles were coming to an end. His four fine horses, moving at a spanking pace, were serving him well and he was pleasantly aware that to right and left of the carriage were two personable young men with fresh faces riding as his aides-de-camp, while behind him and before was an escort of Dragoons. Beside him a secretary sat attentively and opposite him was his valet, Jacques, who kept craning his head out of the window to talk to the two servants on the box.

This was the way to travel. Not for nothing was he Governor of old Castile. A certain state and importance when travelling had become essential.

All this dignity was none the worse for being but a few days old, and General Thibault quailed to think how near he had been to throwing in his hand. His treatment by the Emperor, come to think of it, had been scandalous. True, he had served under Junot, and Junot in Portugal had committed every possible blunder. But there was no reason why the Emperor should visit on Thibault the sins of his betters. The Emperor, these days, was swift to anger and seemed not

greatly to care on whom his wrath might fall. Anyone sufficiently near served as conductor for the Imperial lighting.

Thibault shifted uneasily in his corner of the carriage. He carried, in his mind's eye, a scene of the great square in Valladolid opposite the Archbishop's palace, bright with winter sunshine and packed with troops drawn up after the daily noonday parade. There the wretched Legendre had been led out before them all, his badges of rank torn off and himself sent back to prison. But Legendre, they had said, was lucky. He might well have been shot; Napoleon had no mercy for the officers and men who had surrendered at Baylen. Shooting, perhaps, would have been more merciful. It was not easy to forget the spasm of agony which had for a moment twisted the man's face as the epaulettes had fallen at his feet.

Then had come that terrible interview, over an hour of it, with the Emperor showing the rough side of his tongue, cursing and swearing as though Thibault himself and not Junot had been responsible for the defeat at Vimiero.

There had been nothing for it but to stand there dumb, while the little man, a deep flush on his olive cheeks, walked up and down the room in the Spanish sunshine and railed in metallic and not always intelligible French. A very vulgar scene, and yet there was something about that plump little figure in the green coat that made you feel you were being rated by someone born to fulfil a purpose beyond your apprehension, and therefore to be excused.

Thibault recalled the phrases. Some of them still echoed in his ears:

'That second attack of Colonel Sinclair on a narrow front and at a single point was a blunder. When will

anyone of you learn the elements of your profession? How could you expect to turn the English flank with two battalions of grenadiers? Nothing was ever more futile. I am served by a pack of imbeciles.'

It had been no use repeating that Junot had been in command and not himself, that he had done nothing but execute orders; and, by the time the Emperor had cooled, he had himself been in a towering passion.

'What do you want?' the Emperor had asked in conclusion.

'Nothing, sir.'

'If that be so, sir, good day to you.'

Thibault saw himself once more leaving the room, felt again that impulse, on reaching the stairs, to kick himself for having allowed his temper to get the better of him.

But that same evening had come the orders appointing him Governor of three provinces of Biscay, to be cancelled later by orders appointing him Governor of old Castile.

So now, here he was on the road to Burgos, in haste to take up his command. Duroc, the day before, had described it as a very arduous and difficult post. No doubt it was. Thibault wrinkled his nose. He had passed through Burgos four times in the last month. Though something had been done to clean up the town, conditions there were still pretty bad, and it would be his first task to restore order and see to the wounded. The hospitals, he understood, were appalling. But he would change all that. His bent was administrative. He had been made Governor, though he had asked for nothing, and as Governor he meant to govern.

Suddenly his reflections were interrupted. Jacques, the valet, had leaned forward and was touching him on the knee.

‘ Sir! ’

Thibault turned. The valet’s eyes were round and staring, and he was pointing through the carriage window.

‘ The Emperor, sir,’ he stammered.

Above the drumming hoofs of the escort and the creak of the carriage, there came to the ears of Thibault the sound of horses ridden at a gallop. He thrust his head out of the window and called on the coachman to stop. The carriage pulled up with a jerk and the escort reined in their mounts.

Thibault stared from the window, motionless with astonishment. Not five yards away came riding furiously a man on a bay horse, a small man with a grey overcoat and a plain black hat set crosswise. He passed in a flash, going at full gallop, and, as he did so, he turned and struck with his riding-whip the crupper of his companion’s mount, a young man with a drawn face in the uniform of a Lieutenant of Hussars, whose horse was no match for the bay.

‘ The Emperor,’ repeated Thibault, and his words were echoed by the staring valet.

Swiftly the two figures passed and dwindled into the distance, two tiny forms against a background of stony fields.

Thibault was still staring after them when he became aware of more horses coming up the road and, turning his head, he saw two horsemen bearing down upon the carriage, both riding at the same furious pace as the Emperor. He recognised, as they passed him at full gallop, the dark face of Roustan, the Emperor’s mameluke, riding half a head in front of Duroc, who swayed a little in the saddle and stared straight ahead of him with tired eyes and set lips.

Fifty paces behind came a jumble of troopers, spur-

ring their tired mounts, Chasseurs of the Guard, out-riden by their impetuous master and struggling to overtake him.

The Emperor was taking the road to the frontier.

What could it mean? What, in God's name, could it mean?

§ 2

'This brings us to practical politics. When do I ask for my passports?'

Instinctively Montrond glanced at the shut door and the shrouded windows as Metternich sat back in his chair. Talleyrand, sitting opposite the Austrian, his face smooth and unruffled, did not move.

'It will be for your Government to decide when that step should be taken. It is a formality which should be delayed until your troops are ready to move.'

'My Government would wish to have further assurances.'

'Assurances?'

'That there is nothing to fear from Russia,' continued Metternich.

Montrond, discreetly remote in his corner, wished he knew more of his friend's plans and purposes. Fascinated, he watched the two figures seated by the fire in the small drawing-room, with their hands stretched to the flames beneath the carved mantelpiece. Thus it would always be, in spite of revolution and the changing times. The affairs of nations would continue to be settled before a quiet hearth by men sure of their inheritance. The loud dignitaries of the Empire, the upstart soldiers with their blown women, and the portentous master whom they served and who had imposed them on a disordered world

were here irrelevant. These two men in black, united by race and breeding, drew their conviction from deeper sources. By such should the world be governed and by such, if all went well, it would again be governed, when the Corsican had in the course of nature overreached himself.

'Russia will not stir a man to trouble you,' said Talleyrand. 'Of that I am sure. De Nesselrode has confirmed the undertaking which I had from the Czar at Erfurt.'

'When did you last hear from him?'

'The day before yesterday. He told me then that strict orders had been given to the Russian Army to keep within the frontiers.'

Talleyrand paused a moment.

'The moment has come,' he continued, 'to show decision.'

The pale face was flushed, ever so slightly, but the hand held to the fire was steady.

'What, then, is the latest news from Spain?'

'Good, as far as it goes. The English are not, as the Emperor has claimed, surrounded, and he is driving them to the sea; but the weather, I am told, is abominable and the difficulties of swift pursuit almost insurmountable.'

'The Emperor is tenacious.'

'So much the better. His tenacity will keep him fully occupied five hundred miles from here.'

There was a short silence. Metternich sighed gently.

'Five hundred miles from Paris and another five hundred hence to the scene of war. We shall, of course, move north-west towards the Rhine.'

'But are you ready to move?'

'Very nearly ready. My last advice from the

Archduke leads me to hope that we shall be able to cross the Rhine in three or four weeks from now.'

There was a silence. Then Talleyrand began to speak so low that, for a moment, Montrond could not hear the words. He caught, however, the end of a sentence, something concerning developments in Paris.

'In certain circumstances,' responded Metternich, 'the people of Paris might be difficult to control.'

'Paris, my dear Metternich, will remain under perfect control. I can assure you of that.'

Metternich turned his head slowly.

'May I assume that you will be more closely associated with that control than at present?'

Talleyrand nodded.

'You may understand that also, my dear Ambassador.'

'I imagine that Monsieur Fouché will not be entirely neglected in any new combination which may be necessary?'

'No combination, as things stand at present, could succeed without him.'

Metternich leaned forward.

'I hesitate to enquire too closely into your plans,' he said. 'I have no right to do so and I would even prefer at this moment not to know too much. But there is one thing I feel bound to urge. You have, I think, for some time been convinced that your master is bound in the long run to destroy himself and you are anxious to ensure that your country shall not be involved in his ruin. But the end may be long in coming. He may yet succeed in Spain. Not only may his fall be long deferred, but he may begin to climb again. This is a war of attrition and, in the absence of any unexpected stroke of fortune or policy,

we can only hope to wear him down. I would therefore impress upon you the necessity of avoiding anything in the nature of an open breach.'

Montrond, looking to see how Talleyrand would take this appeal, saw on the face of his friend the disarming smile he had learned from long experience to distrust. It indicated a polite respect for the views to which he listened and a secret determination to disregard them.

'You would advise me, perhaps, to return to Valençay and there continue my entertainment of the Spanish princes.'

'On the contrary, I feel it essential you should remain in Paris, and I am pressing you to do nothing that may make it impossible for you to do so. Not only in your own interests, but in the interests of Europe, I urge you to be careful. Of what service could you be to us in private life on your estate or, worse still, as an exile in Vienna or Petersburg? I beg you to do nothing to diminish your credit with the Emperor.'

Metternich, noted Montrond, was in earnest. His mouth was set and his eyes warm with persuasion. For once he had been awakened out of the calm demeanour upon which his reputation rested. But Talleyrand was still smiling.

'My dear Metternich,' he protested. 'I have no credit with the Emperor. He does not care whether I play him true or false. You underrate Napoleon if you think he has any illusions left about the men who serve him. We work for him, all of us—with the exception of blind adorers like Duroc or Savary—because it is in our own interests to do so and because he is the fount of power and riches. Napoleon knows this well enough. He is, if you like, the managing

director of a large company formed for the exploitation of Europe. Some of us are the big shareholders: princes, dukes and marshals; then come the lesser fry, from the army contractors down to the private soldier himself, who is allowed to lay hands on anything he can get by way of loot. My own position is fairly safe, for I was once of some use to the managing director, who will continue to use me for just so long as he thinks I am satisfied with the profits of the enterprise.'

'But if you make it plain that you are no longer satisfied, he will destroy you. It is no light thing to incur the anger of princes.'

'Am I, then, to wait on the event and do nothing?'

'Austria needs all the help she can get, and you, my dear friend, safely ambushed here in Paris, are of more worth than many battalions. You must not let yourself be driven from that position.'

'My position is perfectly secure for the moment.'

'This open friendship with Fouché. Is it wise? How will the Emperor take it? What is behind it?'

'You do not understand Napoleon. Men like myself or Fouché are beneath his notice till he needs our services. He no longer regards any man as dangerous. Even though he caught me in an act of treason——'

'It would be the Temple or Vincennes,' broke in Metternich, but Talleyrand smiled again.

'No, my friend, there would be a violent and, I fear, a vulgar scene, but twenty-four hours later I should be waiting in his ante-room, with all respect, for his commands.'

'And then?'

'I should continue to wait till he had need of me; a

week, perhaps a month, perhaps a year, or even longer.'

Talleyrand sat upright in his chair, the ebony stick between his feet, one hand upon its silver top, his eyes half closed, the light from the fire shining on his pale face. Metternich now was leaning back. His eyes were troubled.

'You are very sure of the Emperor, but do not drive him to extremes. I beg of you, Talleyrand, to be mindful of the issues and not to go too far.'

Talleyrand opened his eyes wide.

'My dear Ambassador'—he stressed playfully the formal address—'may I beg of you to consider that my relations with the Emperor are based on the most enduring of all human relationships. We each of us have so little respect for one another that we shall always remain completely indifferent to what each of us may do. Nothing I undertake will ever hurt or surprise the Emperor; nothing he can permit himself will ever affect my conduct in his presence.'

Talleyrand suddenly rose, limped across the room to a small bookcase under the window and drew out a slim volume. He turned back to Metternich with a smile.

'I need not ask whether you are well acquainted with the comedies of Molière,' he said turning the leaves. 'I fear to quote from memory, but there is a passage in *Le Misanthrope* which epitomises the relations which should always exist between men of the world. We, who know men for what they are—greedy, dishonest, malicious or unjust—can see them equably and without rancour, and we do not fall into a passion when we find they are moved by just such motives as ourselves.'

He paused a moment and came back to the fire with the book open.

‘Oui, je vois ces défauts, dont votre âme murmure,
Comme vices unis à l’humaine nature ;
Et mon esprit enfin n’est pas plus offensé
De voir un homme fourbe, injuste, intéressé,
Que de voir des vautours, affamés de carnage,
Des singes malfaisants et des loups pleins de rage.’

The quiet voice rose, fell, died away. In the silence that followed Montrond listened to the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and a rustle of flames upon the hearth.

§ 3

Felix woke with a start as the carriage, lurching violently, threw him against Duroc who fended him off with a sharp prod of the elbow. Duroc was still writing as best he could.

‘Give me the paper!’

The Emperor, sitting forward on the opposite seat, took the sheet and the pen with which Duroc had been busy, signed and handed it back. Felix watched the Grand Marshal as, by the light of a twittering lamp, he folded the despatch and flung it from the window. The Emperor had been almost constantly at work since Duroc had picked up the carriage at Bayonne and each order in turn, with the ink scarcely dry upon it, was thrown to the escort, to be retrieved and carried back to Spain.

Felix had never expected to be thus sheltered. Utterly spent, he had yet made shift to climb on the box, hoping that he would not fall off from the rocking seat, perilous to a tired man. But the Emperor had called him down, and, tweaking his right ear, had bade him enter the carriage and sleep his fill.

How long had he slept? The weariness in which he had been lost for days lifted now and then, and he

would see, in sharp detail, the piercing eyes of the man opposite, his white breeches splashed with mud, his grey coat flung back, his face radiant with energy as he dictated, or, in the intervals, talked interminably to Duroc of such matters as came into his head. Once Felix had awakened to find the Emperor reaching to take a volume from a case fitted into the side of the carriage—the Emperor's famous travelling library, made to his own design, in which he kept his favourite books and such new publications as he might wish to sample by the way. Felix had been amused to see how he tore the pages untidily with his finger and, with a sharp word, flung the volume from the carriage so that it struck the horse of one of the escort on the shoulder and caused it to shy violently into the ditch.

'You understand nothing of public affairs.'

The tone was sharp. Felix, who had dozed, came momentarily to his senses. The Emperor was talking again.

'The world is wrong. I am not ambitious. Long nights, fatigues, wars—I am getting too old for all that. I like my bed and my rest as well as anyone. I do not live under canvas for my own pleasure. Believe me, Duroc, I am only human. Whatever some people say, I have a heart. I am touched by the misery of nations. I want to see people happy, and, if I live ten years, there shall be contentment everywhere. Don't you suppose I enjoy giving pleasure? It does me good to see a happy face, but I am compelled to defend myself against this natural disposition lest advantage be taken of it. I have found that out more than once with Josephine, who is always begging for things and can even cry me into granting what I ought to refuse.'

The Emperor's face was the colour of parchment in the light of the carriage lamp.

‘ There are only two alternatives in life, Duroc—to command or to obey. The attitude of Europe and particularly of England towards France has shown me one thing only too clearly: France cannot count on anything but her own power. So I have been driven to make her powerful. I have had to give her large armies and I have had to use them. I have now no choice but to continue. I must finish my work. But I would gladly make any sacrifices to secure a lasting peace such as would guarantee to the French and to the Germans the prosperity which the English enjoy.

‘ But the English must concede to others the rights and privileges which Heaven never intended for them alone. England must be forced to conclude a peace consistent with the rights of others. The Austrians cannot even send out a felucca with a cargo of Hungarian wine without the permission of the court of St. James. The English have driven me to every step I have taken. If they had consented to make peace after Austerlitz or after Tilsit, I would have stayed quietly at home. I should have undertaken nothing outside France. I should have grown rusty and easy-going. Nothing could be more delightful. I am no enemy to the pleasures of life. I am no Quixote with a craving for adventures. I am a reasonable being, who does no more than he thinks will profit him. The only difference between me and other rulers is that difficulties frighten and deter them. But I like to overcome difficulties, whenever it is clear to me that the end in view is a noble one, worthy of myself and of the people over whom I rule.’

Duroc sat back in his corner. He made no comment and did not appear to think that he was called upon to challenge or approve anything his master said. It was as though the Emperor debated remorselessly with

himself, thinking aloud to be relieved of a burden. He was now lying on his special seat so constructed as to make it possible for him to stretch himself at full length.

‘The English have stolen a march on the world, and they defend the privileges which they have unjustly won for themselves at the expense of humanity. My continental system should have the support of all far-sighted men, who are bound to challenge this crushing supremacy that denies to others the right to live in freedom and prosperity. We must establish on the continent the industries of which England claims the monopoly. Already in France and Germany we begin to enjoy the benefits of an industrial development which will in time check the excessive commercial pretensions of the English and make their mastery of the sea less burdensome to her rivals. My blockade of England is criticised by those who will in the long run benefit most from my policy. The very countries which most hotly oppose my prohibitions will do justice to my achievements. To have taught the French and Germans that they can work for themselves and ensure their own internal prosperity is a result which alone will immortalise my reign. Prohibition against prohibitioners is common justice and I must strengthen every measure that will force England to make an early peace. It is better to suffer severely all at once than to suffer over a long time.

‘The English try every means to evade my prohibitions in order to support their industries and uphold their credit and it is my duty to make the blockade effective. They drove me into Spain. They may yet drive me into Russia. But I will never rest till I have won for the nations of Europe the right to live. England fights only for herself and, while she charges me with abusing my power, abuses her own so

flagrantly that soon she will stand alone. The world cannot for ever be sacrificed to the merchants of London, who would keep us all at war to further their speculations. If I triumph over them, Europe will bless me. If I fall, England will drop the mask and it will be realised that the welfare of a continent has been sacrificed to the interests of her merchants and bankers. The continent would blame me within four years should I now abandon the fight and make an improper peace.

‘Whatever happens, posterity will give its verdict for the French. We are fighting now, whatever the world may say, for the general good. I am defending the most sacred rights of nations and I shall succeed. The English have great resources, but their strength depends entirely on their credit. The least thing may paralyse and even destroy their whole system, in spite of the fact that there are among them some very capable men and citizens moved by a true love of their country.’

The Emperor ceased for a moment, as though at last he waited for a comment.

‘How long, sir?’ came at last the tired voice of Duroc. ‘We cannot go on fighting further in the cause of nations which in their blindness refuse to accept our leadership. The English have secured the support even of those whose interests we serve.’

‘If the war continues at the present rate, the English will soon be bankrupt. They cannot avoid it. They will have to reduce their rates of interest and their credit will collapse. Their credit rests on confidence. I admit that a system of continual borrowing, linking as it does the past to the present, does to a certain extent compel confidence in the future. I see also that by involving the fortunes of private individuals in the fortunes of the State the English Government has created for itself an unlimited security based on

individual self-interest. It is for that reason'—here he suddenly raised himself on his elbow—'it is for that reason that we must have patience. But the time is not far off when Canning will find it not so easy to raise any further loans. Then the English will stop subsidising their continental allies and that will be the end.'

Felix heard Duroc sighing in the shadows.

'It will be the end, I tell you,' repeated Napoleon. 'The currencies of Europe, except for those of France and England, are so much waste paper.'

He paused and then abruptly began again:

'But the English will not give way until their credit is destroyed. They will not make peace until they are compelled, and, without an English peace, all others are merely truces.

'Believe me, Duroc, I fight because I must. I have greater need of peace than anyone. The institutions of France are incomplete, and peace alone can enable me to give them full significance. I wish to bring the new France, which came out of the Revolution, into harmony with the old France, which the Revolution superseded. I have great projects. Give me ten years of peace and I will amaze the world. I will exhibit the ancient glories of France beside the new glories we have won. I will marry this new civilisation with the old. I will appear before history and the people of France as the true successor of her kings. Her illustrious men, of all ranks, conditions and times, shall come together and speak to her posterity.'

The carriage swayed so suddenly that Felix was flung against the side. The horses were taking a curve in the road. Then came a shout, a loud jangle of harness and a threshing of hooves. The carriage stopped. The Emperor sat upright and motioned towards the closed window.

‘What is it, Duroc?’

Duroc let down the window and thrust out his head.

‘What has happened?’ he demanded. ‘Why have we stopped?’

Felix heard someone speaking, high above his head. The Emperor’s face was in shadow. Who had dared to stop the carriage?

‘Your pistols, Marbot!’

Napoleon’s voice was sharp and, by the light of the inside lantern, Felix saw that his hand was groping in a leather pocket contrived in the lining of the carriage. Felix caught up the holsters lying at his side as Duroc withdrew his head from the window and turned to the Emperor.

‘It is nothing, sir. One of the horses has fallen dead.’

‘I must get on,’ said Napoleon curtly. ‘Tell them I will ride.’

‘No need to do that, sir. The next stage is only a league away. We can make it with three horses and get a change. It will be quicker in the end.’

Napoleon nodded and sat back in his corner, and presently the carriage started with a jerk. Felix, thrown slightly forward, brushed heavily against the Emperor, who turned to him instantly.

‘You are rested, Marbot?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You were present when Talleyrand received Fouché at his house?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Describe the meeting.’

The Emperor, Felix perceived, was reading the letter he had brought from Walewska.

‘Monsieur Fouché arrived about midnight, or perhaps a little before. Monsieur de Talleyrand walked with his guest through the rooms, and they

retired for a moment to confer in private.'

'All Paris is talking of this?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Thank you, Marbot. You may go to sleep again.'

The Emperor turned to Duroc.

'Admit that I was right, Duroc. Those two men could never work together. Talleyrand has made an alliance with Fouché, but Fouché has betrayed him.'

'Out of loyalty to you, sir, or out of hatred to Talleyrand?'

'Out of neither, my simple friend. He obeys the instinct of self-preservation.'

'I cannot agree, sir, that you should allow Talleyrand to remain in Paris.'

'He is the most capable Minister I have ever had and among those who have done most to establish my dynasty.'

'That, sir, only makes him the more dangerous. Even before your Majesty left the Tuileries he was speaking violently against the Spanish war.'

'He is against the war because I did not make him a Minister with full powers. That has made him furious. He forgets he is a Frenchman. He forgets that Frenchmen are losing their lives in Spain. He runs about like a bad citizen preaching against the affair because he thinks it has taken a bad turn. It is with him as with everyone else. To keep him in order I have always to be successful. He throws stones at me now because he thinks I am beaten.'

The Emperor paused a moment and added bitterly:

'Yet everything I have done against the Bourbons from the start has been done either under his ministry or at his suggestion.'

'Your Majesty is too confident. I would beg you to be on your guard against this man. I truly believe

that his motives lie deeper than you imagine. Nor would I have Your Majesty place the slightest confidence in Fouché. Fouché has betrayed his confederate, but only because he was convinced that Your Majesty . . .’

The voice of Duroc ceased suddenly, and Felix, turning to see the reason, perceived that Napoleon was lying back on his seat with his eyes closed, his breath coming even and regular.

The Emperor was asleep.

§ 4

‘I have no news,’ said Fouché. ‘I have had none for the last four days. Please sit down, my dear Talleyrand.’

‘No news,’ echoed Talleyrand.

‘Either from Naples or from Spain.’

Fouché noted that his visitor seemed not to have heard the invitation to be seated. The heavy velvet coat, which on his own narrow shoulders seemed always a misfit, might have been designed especially for Talleyrand, who, contrary to his usual habit, was wearing a high white linen stock with lace. He stood there leaning on his stick and in his eyes was a comfortless penetration which Fouché did not like. It made him feel ill at ease. Just so had Robespierre looked on a day, long past but not forgotten.

But why remember Robespierre who had been in his grave for many years? The man now before him was no dictator, but stood in greater peril than himself.

‘My dear Talleyrand, do, please, be seated.’

It irritated him to see Talleyrand standing there. It showed a tension he was anxious to relieve. Had not the Emperor said that a tragedy could always be

changed into a comedy by sitting down? But Talleyrand did not move and Fouché turned to the mahogany desk at his side. He pulled down the top and took out a piece of paper.

'I have intercepted this,' he said, and held the paper to the candle-light so that he could read it easily:

I think we may soon be faced with a *coup d'état* in Paris. Talleyrand and Fouché are still of the same mind and apparently determined to seize any opportunity that may present itself. I would liken them to passengers on a ship who, seeing the helm in the hands of a crazy pilot, driving them to the rocks, are ready to leap forward and seize the wheel.

Fouché folded up the paper.

'That, my dear Talleyrand, is an extract from a despatch sent by Metternich to the Emperor of Austria. It is dated the seventeenth and this is the twenty-second.'

'The twenty-third,' corrected Talleyrand.

Fouché looked at the clock. Talleyrand was right. It was seven in the morning and the new day was well advanced. The candles still burned in the high room, but, beyond the heavy curtains, a misty dawn was rising on the river.

'Metternich reads the position with his usual skill,' continued Talleyrand. 'There is, at least, no flaw in his reasoning, though I begin to wonder whether there may not be something wrong with his major premise. That, indeed, is my excuse for this early visit. I am curious to know whether you would confirm his statement that Talleyrand and Fouché are still of the same mind?'

'Have you any reason to doubt it?'

Talleyrand had at last sat down. He did not reply at once. Fouché, realising that he was being quietly

played, so that he might lose countenance, waited with an equal composure.

'It was agreed between us,' said Talleyrand at last, 'that we should send a letter to the King of Naples. Would you be surprised to hear that the letter has not yet been delivered?'

'You are sure of that?'

'I have today received a message from Caroline Murat. I recently took the liberty, in our common interest, of sending to Naples the code-word on which we had agreed. The word, if you remember, was Rubicon, and, on receipt of it, Murat was to start for Paris. It seems, however, that Caroline is unable to persuade her husband that the word means anything at all, and she asks me to be more explicit.'

Talleyrand paused a moment, then raised his eyes suddenly to catch the sliding glance of Fouché.

'I should be the less disturbed by the failure of our joint letter to reach the King of Naples if I were sure that it had not been misdirected.'

He paused a moment and added abruptly:

'The Walewska is still in Paris, I understand.'

Fouché felt it necessary to assume astonishment.

'You continue to be interested in her movements?'

'Not so much in Walewska as in her visitors. She is reported to receive them at unusual hours. I am even more greatly interested in the movements of a young man, Felix Marbot, who has been in her service for some little time.'

Fouché watched the point of Talleyrand's ebony stick idly tracing a pattern at his feet.

'The young man has gone from Paris,' continued Talleyrand quietly. 'It is believed that he has ridden south. Possibly he carries a letter for the Emperor.'

Fouché looked swiftly at his partner, but his glance

shifted under the tranquil, steadfast gaze that met him.

‘I can, of course, ascertain for you his whereabouts.’

Fouché parried without conviction. His guard might be passed, but the forms must be observed.

‘Government stock is surprisingly firm,’ continued Talleyrand. ‘It is even rising slightly, but that is not surprising. My broker informs me that there have been no sales of consequence. I started to sell myself, but was discouraged to find myself alone. No one, apparently, shares my belief that the present Government is likely to fall.’

Fouché watched the point of the stick. It was tracing still a pattern on the carpet, the representation of an eagle with spread wings. It moved with a maddening deliberation. The silence deepened, and at last Fouché lifted his head. Perhaps it was better, in the circumstances, to get the position clear. Talleyrand would never trust him further than he must, and never could they work together except in self-defence.

‘Talleyrand, I think you would have me confess that I did not send that letter to the King of Naples and I think you will be grateful to me for my foresight.’

‘Indeed! May I know the full extent of my indebtedness?’

‘The Emperor is victorious in Spain. He will return. Had that letter gone to Naples as we intended, Murat would now be on his way to Paris and our plans would be public.’

‘Am I to infer that, to save us from the consequences of such a revelation, you arranged for the letter to be delivered to the Emperor?’

‘To put you in a better position to defend yourself. His Majesty is a realist. He will overlook a paper project that failed. But had our design come to the

point of execution, he would have been compelled to exact the penalty.'

Fouché spread his hands. His tone was warm. He must believe himself what he was saying.

'I admit I sent our letter to the Emperor.'

'Intending to disown your signature and to leave me responsible.'

'I should have insisted on the hypothetical nature of the arrangements you were proposing to make.'

'Too kind,' murmured Talleyrand.

'All this, however, is happily beside the point. For though I sent the letter to the Emperor, you have yet to learn what followed.'

'I am to hear, perhaps, that I have still further cause to be indebted?'

'The facts, perhaps, will speak for themselves. I very soon came to regret that our most unfortunate letter should be on its way to Imperial headquarters. I therefore made arrangements to have it intercepted and destroyed.'

Fouché paused a moment, but Talleyrand showed no sign of any increased interest or attention.

'You will, I think appreciate the situation,' added Fouché a trifle sharply. 'There is now no evidence against us. That letter no longer exists, and there is nothing on which the Emperor can act, whatever may be his suspicions. We have now only to wait for a more suitable opportunity.'

Fouché sat back. He would say no more. To speak further against this obstinate silence must be to his disadvantage. There was a short pause, but the waxwork figure opposite was moving at last. The eyes had opened a trifle wider.

Talleyrand leaned forward, and the voice was smooth and friendly.

‘My dear Fouché, you seem to have put yourself to a great deal of trouble over this business. I should, perhaps, be grateful. Let me at least assure you that I fully understand your anxiety to adapt your conduct as actively as possible to the course of events. It must be uncommonly distressing to a man of your temperament to sit still and do nothing. But I remember, years ago, when you were busy in Lyons’—Fouché winced at the reference—‘and when I was condemned to an enforced period of leisure in London, reading for my distraction some of the English poets. One of them has a line which I have always remembered: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” I was much impressed by the sentiment and I have adopted it, within reason, as a rule of life. But it is a maxim difficult of performance.’

Fouché took a grip on himself. He was not going to lose his temper.

‘I waited for many years,’ continued Talleyrand, ‘but, not long ago, I decided that the time for waiting had passed. We decided to take certain action together. I hope you will allow me to regret that, having committed ourselves to that course, you should not have had the patience to continue. I am not yet convinced that our master is so successful as you imagine.’

‘Napoleon is still the Emperor. We must wait for a better occasion.’

Fouché paused. This was no way to handle the situation. Why should he defend himself against unuttered charges of small treachery when he was convinced that Talleyrand had intended to use him and set him aside at the first opportunity? There rose in him a sudden bitter rage against the man who put him in the wrong and yet was equally false to their partnership.

'I have been considering, Talleyrand, what would happen if Napoleon were indeed to be superseded by Murat? How long would such an interregnum last, and what part, I wonder, should I be called upon to play in it?'

Talleyrand looked at him in mild astonishment.

'I thought we had settled that,' he said smoothly. 'We were, if I remember rightly, to work together. I should be Minister of External Relations under the Emperor Joachim. You, of necessity, would be his Minister of Police.'

'For how long?' persisted Fouché. 'I cannot help thinking that the Emperor Joachim, with Talleyrand for his Minister of External Relations, would soon make way for a more legitimate successor.'

'No one can foretell, precisely, what the ultimate form of government would be, but surely it is evident, my dear Fouché, that those who helped to determine it would be rewarded according to their deserts.'

Fouché moved impatiently.

'These speculations,' he said, 'are happily remote. Within a week or ten days the Emperor will have driven the English into the sea. He will return victorious and he will find us loyally awaiting him.'

Talleyrand, too, had risen.

'My thanks, you would suggest, are accordingly due to you for having retrieved us from a situation which might have been unfortunate for both of us. I would not be ungracious, but I think you should have had more confidence in my reading of events. The Emperor has by no means succeeded. He is not yet clear of Spain. Austria is armed and ready. Russia will be neutral. You have, I fear, thrown away a great opportunity. Perhaps the last we shall enjoy together.'

Fouché felt the blood mount in his cheeks. He

turned and faced Talleyrand.

'At least,' he said, 'the Emperor is still in Spain. You have me to thank for that. How long would he have stayed there fighting the English if Murat had come to Paris? You wish to see Napoleon destroyed. Then let him stay where he is, in Spain and bleeding away his power.'

Talleyrand shrugged his shoulders.

'There at least we agree. Let us accordingly rejoice together that our master is still beyond the Pyrenees.'

Talleyrand paused abruptly. The door opposite him had opened. Tisset was entering the room. His usually impassive face was flushed and he came hurriedly forward.

'Excellency,' he stammered.

Fouché looked with irritation at his secretary.

'Yes, what is it?'

'His Majesty the Emperor,' began Tisset.

'What of the Emperor?'

'The Emperor is at the Tuileries, Excellency. He commands your presence within an hour.'

§ 5

Marie Walewska stood at the foot of the bed shaped like a swan. Its muslin curtains made a pale mist at either end and the candles, lit hours ago, were almost spent. On the air was a faint smell of lilies, the scent which she always used. She felt dry and chill, like an ember that has felt the fire, but has been only half consumed. On a marble-topped table beside her lay the novel, *Corinne*, which she had been trying to read. The Emperor had once thrown it aside for trash and had told her not to read it, but on such matters he might

perhaps with advantage be disobeyed. The book lay open, face downward, where she had laid it in the belief that sleep was falling.

But sleep did not come easily to one who lived only for news that was overdue. Felix Marbot had been gone from Paris for more than a fortnight. Surely she must hear soon of the result of his mission? She had followed him in her thoughts, hour after hour, first through the quiet land of France where he rode secure, but soon through a country which had become for her a land of terror, where he rode among men who hated his race and the master he served.

Had she been wise to trust in Fouché and lend herself to his shifting schemes? Was it truly his purpose to save the Emperor? She knew him for a man who veered and trimmed to every wind, strangely coarse and as strangely delicate in his perceptions. There might be something deeper than she had fathomed in his betrayal of Talleyrand. Here, in any case, was something more elaborate than a young man on the wrong side of a locked door.

Was Napoleon, as the design of Talleyrand implied, caught in a trap from which there was no escape? Sooner or later the end must come. Of that, if the fulsome spirit that drove him were not checked, she was sure. But let it not be yet. Let him have still a chance to recover sanity and poise.

His mother and his wife had both commended her and more than once she had wished to see Letizia again. But what purpose would it serve? Letizia would be as kind as her bitter Corsican nature allowed, but where was the comfort she could offer? There was no peace to be had, except an assurance from Spain that Napoleon had been warned in time and was safe from his enemies.

Through a division in the curtains a grey light was

creeping: a feeble thing, but soon it would quench the fading candles. Was it already dawn? She put her hand to the curtain and made to draw it back a little, but stayed the gesture as she caught sight of her face in the mirror. Was she, as they whispered, losing her looks? She pulled the curtain back into place so that the dawn was shut out, and, crossing the room, took up a branched candlestick and returned to the mirror, letting the light fall upon her face.

There were shadows beneath her eyes, but, except for them, her face appeared to her unchanged from the day when she had first received his praise and the hilt of his sword had pressed against her side.

Surely if she stood thus, alone with this memory of his presence, she could bring him, if only in imagination, close enough to ease the pain of her desire? The doors of the press would open and his cloak tumble to the floor behind him. He would come with hands outstretched, his keen face alight, stepping behind her, and thrust his soldier's hands beneath her arms, and she would feel his lips low down upon her neck in the hollow that remembered them.

So she stood, till it seemed to her that a noise from the press had broken the silence. So strong, she thought, was imagination.

She opened her eyes with a cry. This was no fancy. The face of Napoleon was over her shoulder and his cloak fell to the floor as she turned and was gathered into his arms.

§ 6

It was so dark that Stanhope twice blundered into the stone houses that stood shuttered against the troops on either side of the narrow street under the ramparts of Coruña. The men of whom he was in

charge were not of his regiment but of the Ninth, the confusion being such that few units were still to be distinguished, and he had found himself at nightfall detailed by Major Colborne, Sir John Hope's aide-de-camp, to command the burial party.

They were marching now up the narrow, uneven street. Behind him the eight bearers advanced in step, a dark blanket swinging from two wooden poles slung between their shoulders.

Thus would they bury their General, fallen at the moment of victory.

Stanhope had not seen him fall. He had been in another part of the field, entangled between the stone walls that intersected so aimlessly the rocky hillside of the Monte Moro. Of the battle he knew almost nothing. It was, he understood, a victory, but the enemy guns were still speaking and most of the English army were by this time aboard or crowding down to the sea. All they had won was leisure to embark and bring to a humble finish their terrible retreat.

The chink of metal against rock and a low oath brought him back to his business. The wind, with a whip of salt and a whiff of rain, beat about his head as he came to the rampart and saw, twenty paces in front of him, the gleam of a lantern. A vague shape with a bare forearm, the hand gripping a spade, showed for a moment against the night sky.

'Bearer party, halt!' he rapped out.

The men behind him obeyed.

'Not so loud,' came a voice in his ear, 'or the French may open on us.'

'Sorry, sir,' muttered Stanhope and looked round.

A small group of five or six officers was standing a few paces away. Through the blown folds of their black cloaks their uniforms gave out splashes of waver-

ing colour in the light of a lantern shining from the edge of a shallow pit. Far above his head a whistle sounded, followed by a thud somewhere in the town. The French batteries were firing from the heights above Fort San Diego.

The group by the open grave stirred and removed their cocked hats. At its head stood Sir John Hope himself, the new Commander. Stanhope ordered the bearer party to move forward quietly. Sir John stood to attention. There came another thud, nearer than the first, and Stanhope glanced aside to where the riding-lights of the transports were rocking. Behind him a grey light was forming in the east. He shivered, for it was bitterly cold with the chill of dawn.

'Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live and is full of misery.'

A short man, his surplice blowing in the wind over his shoulders, was standing at the head of the grave next to Sir John Hope. He read the service rapidly, looking frequently and uneasily over his left shoulder towards the French position. The gun flashes came faster as battery after battery opened fire.

'We therefore commit his body to the grave, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

The Chaplain finished in a gabble and added abruptly: 'Lower him quickly, men.'

Stanhope, standing rigidly to attention, gestured to the bearers who lowered their bundle into the shallow pit. A gap in the blanket showed the General's cloak wrapped about the head and shoulders. Scarcely had the bundle come to rest before the first clod of earth fell callously and with a soft violence upon the unprotected body.

'Gentlemen,' it was Sir John Hope speaking, 'Sir John Moore is dead, but he died at the moment

of victory. We sail this day for England, but '— here he turned as though to address the French batteries — 'rest assured we shall return.'

Stanhope stood with clenched hands watching the earth as it fell. Most certainly they would return. They would not be finally driven into the sea by the French, as though they had come but to show them English heels. Only there must be better organisation next time, and, God please, better weather.

'Who also hath taught us not to be sorry as men without hope, for they that hope in Him . . .'

The rest was lost in a crashing of tiles as a round shot from the French batteries struck the roof of a house not twenty yards away.

The new Commander-in-Chief turned his face a second time towards the French lines and young Stanhope saw him a moment in profile against the false dawn. His lips were moving. It seemed as though once again the full warm voice were bidding those enemy batteries be sure they would return.

§ 7

The sunshine, still uncertain but very welcome, thought Savary, after weeks of rain, shone full upon the wide single window by which he stood. He could look out, if he chose, over the gardens of the Tuileries and away to the crowds which were slowly dispersing after the eleven o'clock parade.

He transferred his weight from his right to his left foot and looked away from the window into the room. His mind was still on the crowds outside, before whom he had ridden ten minutes ago in attendance on the Emperor. How they had cheered, each crashing shout of 'Long live the Emperor' louder than the one

before, as Napoleon on his white horse, but without the grey overcoat for the first time in many weeks, had ridden down to them after taking the salute at the end of the parade. There was no doubt of it: Paris was thankful to see the Emperor back again, safe and well, quit of the peril and misery of Spain.

An uneven footstep on the polished floor recalled Savary to present business. Talleyrand was coming through the door, and, at sight of him in his court dress, a wave of contempt and hatred broke in Savary. On the crest of it, however, rode a savage satisfaction. Talleyrand was about to pay his reckoning and he would pay it in full.

The man must know what was coming. Yet he showed no visible discomfiture, but came into the room with a nod of greeting to Cambacérès and the rest.

Cambacérès himself was less in countenance. He grinned uneasily, his big red face showing like a lamp above his stock, as Talleyrand moved slowly past. Decrès beside him, in his Admiral's uniform, plain, blunt and loyal, almost turned his back, and Le Brun, arch-treasurer, scarcely knew which way to look.

'Good morning, General.'

Talleyrand, composed and friendly, was speaking. Savary stiffened, but relaxed in spite of himself. Such courtesies must be met. Mask to mask the two men smiled and nodded.

Fouché came next and Savary felt a quickening of the pulse as the ex-Minister of External Relations drew abreast of the Minister of Police. Seemingly there were limits to the polite assumption that all were gentlemen together, for not by the flicker of an eyelid did Talleyrand show any recognition of the man who had betrayed him to the Emperor.

Only the devil knew what was between those two.

Fouché had not come so badly out of the mire, though not, perhaps, as cleanly as he fancied. Savary, waiting in the ante-room, had heard a good deal of what the Emperor had said a few hours past to his Minister of Police: a series of sharp questions with dry, incredulous comments upon the answers. Of course, he had admitted Fouché, he had signed the letter. But he had conceived it his duty to do so. Had not the Emperor ordered him to keep close watch on Talleyrand? Perhaps he had been too zealous, but, having discovered that Talleyrand was in correspondence with the King and Queen of Naples, what could he do but take effective steps to discover what was passing; and, having signed the letter, had he not at once arranged that it should be despatched to the Emperor without delay? Let the Countess Walewska herself be his witness, who had sent her own equerry with the message into Spain. Young Marbot, it seemed, had met with difficulties by the way. But was that circumstance in any way remarkable? The roads were not safe in the Landes. It was regrettable but true. With so many armed men, riding to and from the war, it was not easy to maintain the safety of the roads in Southern France. He would look into the matter, if His Majesty so desired, and report the results of his enquiry.

Abruptly the Emperor had dismissed him, and a moment later had issued orders that the high dignitaries of the Empire were to meet him in his study at noon.

So here they all were, present and waiting.

The voices of Decrés and Le Brun, talking together in a corner of the room, ceased suddenly. The Emperor had come to the door, thrusting aside Duroc, who had started to announce him. In three rapid paces he was in the midst of them. He halted and

swung round awkwardly, one hand on the edge of the writing-table, almost touching the crystal vase that stood among the papers. His eye swept the room and for a moment there was utter silence, till Napoleon turned to Cambacérès.

‘Those whom I have made High Dignitaries or Ministers of my Empire,’ he said, ‘can no longer regard themselves as free, either in their thoughts or in the expression they give to them. By virtue of their office they speak for me. For them, therefore, it is treachery to encourage in their minds any doubt of my decisions. To utter such doubts or to act upon them is treason.’

The Emperor paused. No one moved. Savary, his senses sharpened, was keenly aware of the cold of the window-pane against which the back of his head was pressing. He looked round the circle. Le Brun and Cambacérès were standing together by the Emperor’s right hand. Cambacérès was even redder than usual, his huge throat and chest bursting from the gold and velvet of his dress, and, even as Savary glanced at him, he thrust a fat finger nervously between stock and neck. His bulk partially obscured the lesser form of Le Brun, who was standing rigid. Beyond, nearer the main door of the study, stood Decrès, his honest face expressing a certain bewilderment, which he could not conceal.

Fouché stood opposite, in the far corner of the room, his face in shadow.

Savary’s glance was drawn finally to the Vice Grand Elector. Talleyrand, unlike the rest, who were standing stiffly to attention, was leaning with one arm on a high console of dark polished mahogany, to ease the weight of his body from his lame leg. His attitude suggested a slight interrogation, as though he wondered

what had occasioned these impetuous observations of his master.

‘When there are traitors in high places I tear the mask from their faces and expose the corruption beneath.’

The Emperor took a sudden pace forward till he faced Talleyrand with less than a foot between them. His chin was thrust out and his feet wide of each other.

‘You are a thief and a coward, a man without faith. You do not believe in God. All your life you have failed to perform your duty. You have deceived everyone who trusted you. For you nothing is sacred. You would sell your own father. I have covered you with favours. Yet there is nothing you would not do against me.’

Savary felt the palms of his hands going dry. He had seen the Emperor in a rage before, but nothing to compare with this. Yet Talleyrand stood motionless and his face retained the same look of faint enquiry.

‘For the last ten months, because you thought things were going wrong with me in Spain, you have had the impertinence to say to anyone who would listen to you that you always disapproved of my policy in that kingdom, though it was you—you, Talleyrand, my Minister—who first suggested it. What is this infamous game you play with me? You betray me to my enemies. How much do they pay you to destroy your country?’

Savary, looking at the gorgeous figures who stood about the room like waxworks, had a fantastic notion that they must melt beneath the blast of this fury. Even the red face of Cambacérès had turned paler. But Talleyrand only shifted a little, to ease still further the weight from his lame leg, and turned his head ever so slightly, as though he were a little deafened and

could not quite hear what the Emperor said.

‘What are your plans? What do you want? Tell me what you intend to do.’

The Emperor paused and snatched the crystal vase from the table.

‘You deserve to be broken, as I break this glass.’

Napoleon leaned forward, lifting his free hand, as the glass shattered to fragments on the wall, and, for an instant, Savary thought he would strike Talleyrand across the face. But he stepped back again and continued on a lower note.

‘I might have you hanged from the railings of the Carrousel? But that would be taking you at your own value as a creature to be feared. Do you know what you are?’

His head went back. Savary saw that his face was livid.

‘You are nothing but a lump of dung in a silk stocking!’

Not a muscle of Talleyrand’s face moved and, into Savary’s mind as he watched, came a remembered saying of Lannes that, if you were talking to Talleyrand and someone kicked his backside, no one would know it from his face. His quiet air of detachment seemed to add the last drop to the Emperor’s cup of wrath. He drew back his head like a snake that would strike where his prey was vulnerable.

‘You never told me that the Duke of San Carlos was your wife’s lover,’ he barked.

There came a soft hiss of indrawn breath from Le Brun and Decrès. Napoleon’s face flushed a deep red, and at last Talleyrand was speaking.

‘Indeed, sir,’ he said with a slight bow, ‘it never occurred to me that such a relationship would increase the good fame of Your Majesty or of myself.’

The Emperor stepped backwards. His right hand was shaking. Was he about to speak again?

Then, abruptly, the square shoulders were thrust back and the short thick body swung forward with rapid steps. Looking neither to right nor to left, Napoleon reached the door of his bedroom, tore it open before Savary could spring forward to perform that office and slammed it shut behind him.

The tension broke. Cambacérès turned and put out a hand on the back of a chair to steady himself, and, scarcely knowing what he did, Savary walked forward. He felt that somehow he must leave the room. The others he saw were crowding together in a knot about Cambacérès.

Savary looked back from the door, and, as he did so, heard a limping step not far away. Talleyrand was beside him, and Savary, not knowing what he did, threw the door open and stood aside.

Talleyrand gave a patient shrug as he passed through.

‘How unfortunate,’ he murmured, ‘that so great a man should have been so badly brought up.’

§ 8

‘Forgive me, Marie, I could not come before. There is always work to do.’

Napoleon came forward into the room, and, at sight of him, her resentment, for he was very late, was instantly appeased. This was not the eager lover who had come to her within five minutes of his arrival at the capital. He was tired, and, for the first time she could remember, he did not take her in his arms, but stood at a distance waiting for her to speak. When she said nothing, not yet sure of his mood, he threw his cloak

on the floor by the press and, unbuckling his sword, laid it upon the bed. Then at last he bent and kissed her hands.

‘This is good,’ he murmured and she felt his lips moving against her fingers. He raised his head and she saw how pale he was.

‘What is it, Napoleon?’ she asked. ‘Is this trouble serious?’

‘Trouble?’

She saw that her question puzzled him.

‘Talleyrand and Fouché—the conspiracy.’

He sat on the bed, drawing her down with him, but keeping her at arm’s length.

‘That is nothing. I dealt with Talleyrand this morning. He is no longer Grand Chamberlain.’

‘Is that all you mean to do?’

‘What do you want me to do? Cut his head off? That would be foolish. I shall need him again some day. The man is a scoundrel, and I am not sure that Fouché is not even worse. But I must use these men and, if for a moment they were partners in this business, they will certainly never work together again, and it will take more than my clever sister, though she has hated me since nursery days, and her fool of a husband to drive me from the throne of France. Besides, they have learned their lesson.’

Marie wondered why he had come to her. For consolation? He sat silent a while, then raised his head. She noticed particularly how heavy his face was in profile.

‘For the moment,’ he said, ‘the Spanish business is settled. But the nation is against me and the English will return.’

He jumped to his feet and began to walk restlessly up and down the room.

'Now I must fight the Austrians. English gold has done its work there, too. They are getting ready to attack me. I ask for nothing better. It will be months before the English can be back again in Spain. Meantime I shall crush the Austrians, as I crushed them four years ago. The fools will never learn. Why do they never wait and strike together? England pays Austria to keep the field till she herself is ready. I shall take them one by one.'

He laughed, suddenly, harshly.

'It is always so with these allies. No organisation or forethought. They do not realise, Marie, that the whole secret of successful war is timing. Timing is everything. I am working already at my campaign. I shall fall upon them suddenly, as they think. But there is no such thing as improvisation. Nothing in war comes by surprise—except defeat.'

He began to pace up and down the room more slowly, his step no longer assured, and she knew he was talking, as so often now, to keep up his spirits. He stopped beside her as she stretched out a hand to him. He took it and sat beside her.

'Marie,' he said, 'can no one give me rest?'

She put her arms about his neck and he kissed her, holding her awkwardly.

'You know how terrible it is to me that you cannot escape from this endless fighting.'

'Soon I shall have peace and work only for France. But first——'

'First you must fight the Austrians and then the English again. There is no end to it. You have gone too far, and now—let me say what is in my mind, for I have had long hours to consider it—there is no way out for you but one.'

She paused and found him looking at her intently.

‘ You cannot destroy the dynasties. They must be persuaded to accept you. You must come to terms with them, enter their system to escape the one you have yourself created.’

She felt his recoil before she had finished.

‘ What, Marie? Come to terms with the Hapsburgs and the Bourbons? These men have made misery in Europe for a thousand years.’

He rose from the couch and stood looking down at her.

‘ To do that is to deny my origin. I am still the heir of the Revolution, which has made France the greatest nation in the world. Am I to be false to the forces that put me where I am? ’

Again he dropped beside her on the couch.

‘ Marie, it is you who have always insisted on talking politics. But tonight it is I who have come to talk to you.’

She felt his breath on her cheek.

‘ I will not enter the dynasties, Marie. I must continue as I began, but with you beside me. If I cannot escape from the position I have made for myself, I can at least share it with the only woman who has ever loved me, or made it easier to bear. Marry me, Marie. Be my Empress. I have asked you this before. I have come here tonight to ask it again.’

She felt his mouth upon her own as he finished speaking, and, for an instant, she lost all desire to think. But the weakness passed, and, at her first movement, he released her as suddenly as he had taken her and drew back.

‘ No,’ she said. ‘ It is impossible. You cannot set aside the old standards on which the authority of kings is based. You have chosen to become an Emperor and have thereby set yourself apart from

other men. You talk to me of marriage. You mean to put away your wife. If you do that, you must marry someone of royal blood who will give you an heir to succeed you and be accepted by the royal houses of Europe. That is the only way to save your throne.'

'No.' The voice of Napoleon cut across her pleading. 'If I must go down, let it be as one who dared to do as he wished.'

He seized her wrist.

'You are wrong, Marie. If I make you my Empress, the people who put me where I am, the men who fight my battles and the women who bear their sons for France, will understand and will approve. I should be cutting the ground from under my feet if I came to terms with traditions which have lost their meaning. Have I not helped to destroy them everywhere? My task, Marie, is to build a new world, not to patch up the ruins of the old. I have made my brothers kings. Am I now to beg or steal a king's daughter, so that my son may be of the blood?'

He rose impatiently and moved towards the press, so that for a moment she was afraid he was going to leave her, unpersuaded.

'Come back!'

He turned and faced her again.

'Even if you marry out of your rank,' she continued, 'you cannot marry me. The Czar is no longer your friend. You cannot afford at this, of all moments, to make him your enemy. If you married me, a Polish woman, you would have news of him soon enough. He would consider it a threat and such it would be. Take care, my dear. You would have to give me the kingdom of Poland as a wedding present.'

She smiled at him to cover the effort she was making to convince him, but upon the face of Napoleon there was no answering gleam. He looked thoughtful. There was silence a moment.

‘A Polish kingdom,’ he said. ‘That is not impossible. Give me time. For the moment it should satisfy your people to have a Polish Empress in France. That should bring them to my colours. Then, perhaps, I could go further. Alexander must not think he can do as he pleases in Eastern Europe. Some day there will be a reckoning between us.’

She looked at him in amazement, which turned quickly to a resigned acceptance of something she had always known. This man, who talked of peace and complained that his enemies would never let him rest, still intended to be master.

‘I pray God you will never be driven to provoke the Czar,’ she said. ‘You shall not, in any case, do it on my account. For your own sake and for the peace of the world, you shall not mix me up with your politics.’

‘Marie,’ his voice broke upon her name and he thrust his arms about her. He pulled her to her feet. Her hands were pressing against the lapels of his green coat.

‘I will not marry you, my dear. I will be your mistress when and how you please, but I will do nothing to make further trouble for you anywhere. God forgive me, Poland shall mean no more to me. I will not speak of it again. I am yours, to do as you please with, but not your Empress—only a woman to give you such happiness as I can in this or any other corner that you may keep for me. I will talk no more—you never liked me to talk—but only love you as you wish to be loved.’

'Marie'—she felt his hands gripping her shoulders and thrusting her back—'you will do this for me. Then why not——'

She put her hand across his mouth and felt his lips, hot and dry, mumbling the palm of her hand.

'Put all this out of your mind, while you are here.'

He released her and stepped back so quickly that she almost fell.

'It shall be as you wish,' he said, and his head went back in the awkward gesture she knew and loved.

'I accept what you say and will not complain. This dream is finished. I shall go to Austria in a month. What next? I do not know, except that it will be determined for me when the moment comes. I shall never have the happiness I hoped to find in you. Happiness is not for such a man as I have become.'

He broke off and stood a moment, his hands thrust into the small of his back. She saw him lost in contemplation of himself, master and slave. His lips were moving.

'Great men are meteors. They burn themselves out to light the world.'

He paused, and, breaking his pose, came towards her.

'Marie, you will leave Paris. Go back to Warsaw. We will meet again two months hence in Vienna.'

His eyes were bright as he took her in his arms.

An hour later she lay on the bed straining her ears after his steps that receded behind the door of the great press. He had started again upon his journey. Who could tell how long the journey would be? She only knew that, wherever it might lead him, he must henceforth take it alone.

§ 9

The desk was strewn with papers ready for the Emperor's signature: despatches, orders, letters, laid out just so and not otherwise. Méneval put a hand to the small of his back as he bent over the shining bronze and mahogany. This lumbago was troublesome and February days were treacherous. He was thinking what a really hot bath would do, with plenty of essence of pines in it, though when he would have time for such a thing was a problem, with all this work to be faced.

The Emperor was to go again to the wars, eastward this time, but luckily not at once. Campaigning on the Danube and the Inn, a bad business in this sort of weather, was fortunately not yet upon the calendar. None of the necessary troops were on the move, and it would take a month, six weeks, perhaps, to get them in position. Only then would the Emperor leave Paris, and in six weeks' time spring would be well on the way, if not fully come.

He saw in fancy a rain-splashed road, with puddles reflecting the blue sky across which the white spring clouds were blown. The fields at each side were green and from the new grass rose the slim trunks of fruit trees gay with blossom. Down the road marched men in blue, singing and with bugles crying out before them.

Méneval, forgetting his pain, stared out across the wide desk, through the window at the end of the study, to the branches, vexed and bare, of the trees in the garden outside. The sun had just set and the room was in heavy shadow, but not yet quite dark. From beyond the garden came the steady murmur of Paris.

He heard a step behind him and turned suddenly.

But it was only a lackey with taper in hand, who moved to the candles which stood on the mantelpiece and on the small table by the chair where the Emperor read his papers. He watched the man, in his Imperial livery of dark blue, gold lace at the seams and white silk stockings, move with the precision of an automaton to light the candles, to throw more wood upon the fire, to adjust the screen and finally to draw the curtains.

The man left the room as silently as he had come. A glazed cupboard set against the wall reflected the candles and a clock ticked huskily between two tall bookcases at the far end. A gleam from the fire caught the small bronze statue of Frederick the Great.

A door opened suddenly. Méneval stiffened and bowed. The Emperor, his white kersey breeches sharp against the low lights of the room, came briskly forward. He nodded to Méneval without speaking, took up the pen laid ready and bent over the desk. For a moment there was no sound in the room but the squeak of the quill as he signed the papers.

Five minutes passed.

Méneval crossed the room and sat at his own desk, gently working the fingers of his right hand in preparation for the dictation which the Emperor would require him to take.

Suddenly Napoleon looked up.

‘What is this?’ he asked.

Méneval hastened forward and shot a glance over the Emperor’s shoulder at the paper under his hand.

‘A commission, sir. Your Majesty ordered me to submit it for your signature. Lieutenant Felix Marbot, Ninth Hussars.’

The Emperor bent down and scrawled his signature.

‘Make a note, Méneval,’ he said. ‘Lieutenant Marbot is not to join his regiment for six weeks or

possibly two months. He is to be seconded for special duty and is to report to Duroc the day after tomorrow. I desire him to conduct Madame Walewska back to Warsaw.'

'Yes, sir.'

The Emperor went on signing the papers and then straightened himself.

'The maps,' he said.

Méneval suppressed a sigh and rose to his feet, the Emperor being already through the door and in the room adjoining. The maps were spread wide on two long tables, with pin heads of black or red sealing wax thrust into them. Méneval dreaded most these hours with the maps. The Emperor would dictate, perhaps for hours, and how tiresome that would be, for he could never pronounce correctly those outlandish German names.

Méneval sat down at the little writing-table beside the maps.

'Operation orders for Berthier,' Napoleon suddenly began. 'The Second Corps, under Oudinot, will start on the twenty-fourth from Metz. On the twenty-sixth they will be at Strasbourg. They will cross the Rhine on the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth at Kehl. The Light Cavalry under General Colbert will move south-east towards . . .'

HISTORICAL NOTE

THE present story covers ten months in the life of Napoleon, from March 1808 to January 1809. It was the period in which, at the height of his power, he decided to suppress the Bourbon dynasty in Spain and thus committed himself to a policy which, as Talleyrand foresaw, would ultimately destroy him. We see him passing from a phase of his career, when he was free to determine his acts and might still keep his ambitions commensurate with his resources, into a period when his conduct from day to day was determined for him by circumstances which had passed beyond his control. We find him becoming entangled in a system which he has wilfully created, and his future conduct, for all the brilliant opportunism with which he will meet each succeeding crisis as it arises, will be imposed upon him by the logic of events. He has lost his personal identity in a process which he deliberately started but cannot arrest. 'Great men are meteors; they burn themselves out to light the world.' Opinions may vary as to the degree of illumination shed upon humanity by this cosmic figure, but that Napoleon in 1808 entered definitely upon the meteoric course which was to bring him to earth eight years later, dark and spent, upon the field of Waterloo, is the historic truth—or, if you will, hypothesis—on which this novel is based.

All the principal and most of the minor characters

in this book, from Napoleon himself to Dominique Fleuret, corporal of the Fifty-fifth, are historical, and no conscious liberties have been taken with essential facts and policies. There are, of course, moments when Napoleon, withdrawn from the observation even of such close personal attendants as his secretary Méneval or Constant, his valet, must speak intimately in terms unrecorded and necessarily imagined. But even in these intimate scenes every word that touches upon matters of conduct or policy or the appreciation of men and things is as authentic as possible, and in no case has invention been used to distort recorded observations.

Those who are unfamiliar with Napoleon's habit of speech will be astonished by its inequality of style and substance. They will find him in turns shallow, profound, shrewd, ingenuous, laconic, verbose, simple, pretentious, swift, stimulating or infinitely tedious, and they may frequently suspect invention or interpolation when they hear him pass so quickly from live thought to dead commonplace or from his usual swift economy of utterance to the rhetoric which he often used to impress the vulgar or impose upon himself. Those who are well acquainted with Napoleonic literature, however, will have little difficulty in recognising the sources of this strange eloquence. I have merely reserved the right now and then to ascribe to Napoleon in 1808 and 1809 things which were, in fact, said by him before or afterwards. More particularly the speeches to which Duroc is obliged to listen during the journey back to Paris in January 1809 reproduce a good deal of what was, in fact, said by Napoleon to Caulaincourt during the return from Russia in 1812.

I have aimed at a similar fidelity in presenting Talleyrand, Fouché, Josephine and the rest, but, in proportion as there is less recorded of their speech or

writing, there has necessarily had to be more invention.

To portray Napoleon in a work of fiction is an enterprise which may be undertaken in many different ways. The method here adopted assumes that he is too great a figure to be confined within the limits of any simple or consistent presentation, and that the sum total of the effect he had upon his generation will best become evident by allowing him to be viewed successively by those who came into touch with him. There are, in fact, as many Napoleons in this book as there are men and women to approach him. His personality is revealed in active relation to the people through whose minds the story is unfolded. We see him through the eyes of Walewska who loved him, of Duroc and Savary who served him faithfully, of Talleyrand who betrayed him, of Josephine who struggled to retain him, of the soldiers who fought for him, of those who lived nearest to him and furthest away. The personality that emerges may be difficult to grasp, but only by means of such successive views from different angles does it seem possible to avoid distorting or limiting the full character as expressed in all its various contacts and relationships.

This method of presenting events successively through the eyes of many different persons in every class of society has the further advantage of enabling the author to give a more varied and vivid picture of the times than would be conveyed if he wrote continuously in his own person and from his own point of view, and it is extended to cover not only the persons of the story but the external furnishings of the period. The house in the Rue d'Houssaye, the demesne of Talleyrand at Valençay, the Emperor's study in the Tuileries, all the pageantry of Empire, the circumstance of war and the splendours of conference are, as far as possible, presented, not as they would appear to an

author intruding from the twentieth century, but as they were seen by those who lived in that environment.

It remains briefly to indicate the kind of licence which seemed necessary to the conduct of the tale. First, there are the compressions inevitable in any handling of an historical theme in fiction. It was necessary to take as short a time-limit as possible if the period covered was to be presented in sufficient detail. Napoleon's relations with Walewska, which began at Warsaw in January 1807, came to a climax in the birth of her son by the Emperor in May 1810. Walewska's renunciation of the idea of marriage with Napoleon, an episode in which I have permitted myself a wide measure of interpretation, would have had greater significance if it had taken place when Napoleon knew that he was to be the father of her child, but to date the renunciation later than January 1809 would have meant prolonging the book to twice its present length. Napoleon's relations with Walewska had to be compressed within the limits of the chosen period and she had also to be continually present. She is accordingly shown as coming to Paris in March 1808 and preparing to leave Paris in January 1809, her movements within this period being adapted to the needs of the story. In presenting what I believe to be the essentials of her relationship with Napoleon, I have frankly disregarded accidents of time and place. There is, of course, no historic justification for bringing her to Nantes in July 1808, or to Erfurt in October. No liberties whatever, on the other hand, have been taken with the movements of Napoleon himself.

Another example of a compression of events secured by a conscious rearrangement of the plain facts of history is the scene in the garden at Marrac following the arrival of Marcellin Marbot from Madrid.

There are several conflicting accounts of what actually took place, but it is clear that the events here presented in a single scene were, in fact, spread over several days. It may also be mentioned, as an example of the kind of liberties taken with unessential facts, that Marcellin Marbot is permitted, as he claimed in his memoirs but against the evidence of history, to bring to Marrac the famous despatch from Madrid announcing the events of May 2nd, 1808, and that his brother Felix is permitted to act as equerry to Walewska throughout the tale, whereas, in fact, this young man had been killed in a duel before the story opened. But Felix Marbot is no more than a typical young gentleman of the period and the name was too good a one to lose.

Most important, perhaps, of the questions likely to be asked is to what extent the conspiracy between Talleyrand and Fouché is fact or fiction. In describing this extraordinary event, too strange for any novelist to be so bold as to present it as an invention, I have followed history as exactly as possible, so far as history will take us. It is a fact that Fouché and Talleyrand, after years of hostility and dislike, came together in a sensational public alliance during Napoleon's absence in Spain. It is a fact that they were taking steps to provide against the possibility of Napoleon's defeat or death. It is a fact that Murat was somehow implicated. It is a fact that Napoleon received by a camp fire in the neighbourhood of Astorga a mysterious despatch which caused him immediately to abandon his pursuit of Sir John Moore and to return to Paris as fast as his horses would take him. It is a fact that he rebuked Fouché in private and disgraced Talleyrand in public. It is a fact that Talleyrand throughout this period was in treasonable

correspondence with the Czar and the Emperor Francis.

In presenting these events, I have kept as closely as possible to the records. But imagination must fill the gaps which history has left vacant, and, in allowing imagination to do so, I have tried to remain as consistent as possible with the known facts and characters of the story and not to force unduly the melodramatic quality of the period beyond its natural possibilities.

These, however, are secondary questions of framework and incident. My story must stand or fall by the measure in which it succeeds or fails as a presentation of Napoleon himself, moving in his historic person and speaking in his historic voice as Emperor, soldier, statesman, lover, administrator, ruler and commentator on men and things. If the result has, at times, a semblance of extravagant romance, that appearance is due to no romantic bias of the author but to the fact that he is calling to life a figure who embodied in his own person all the romantic qualities of the most romantic period of modern times.

THE END

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